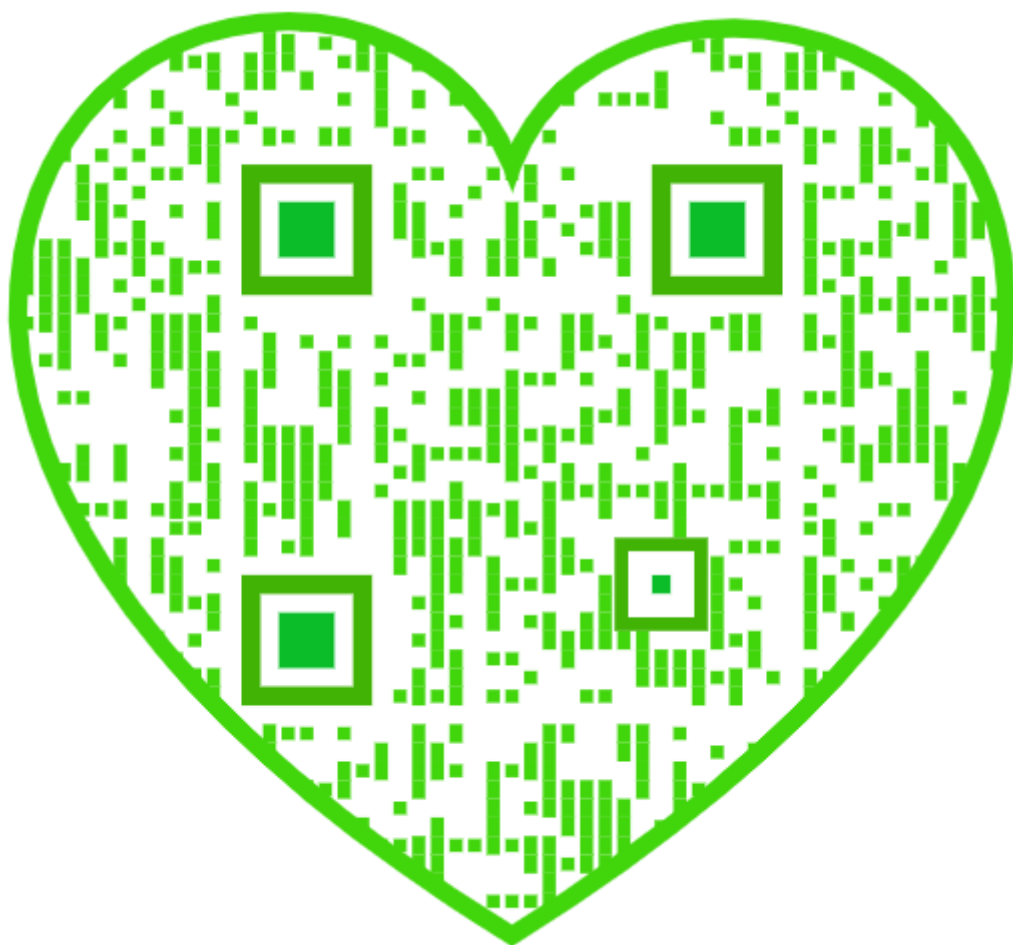




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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XVIII



**HOW
A
REALIST
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Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XVII





Yuriga Haan

Fuuga Haan

"AND WHAT
I WANT TO
TELL YOU IS
ABOUT THE
WORLD
WHERE THIS
THING WAS
BORN."

XVIII

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru

Illust. Fuyuyuki



WORLD MAP

HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM





Contents

Prologue

Old Man, the Ultimate Weapon

Chapter 1

Petty Trickery Runs in the Family

Chapter 2

New Years in Both Camps

Chapter 3

The Paths of Brother and Sister

Chapter 4

Towards World War

Chapter 5

Intense in the South, Quiet in the West

Chapter 6

For Whom Do You Fight?

Chapter 7

Even If We Part

Chapter 8

Illusions on the Kingdom Front

Chapter 9

A Heated Battle! The Red Dragon City Front

Chapter 10

Shared Pain

Chapter 11

The Moment the Era Changed

Epilogue

Yuriga's Battle

Afterword



Prologue: Old Man, the Ultimate Weapon

Issued jointly by the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire of Haan, the declaration of the complete liberation of the Demon Lord's Domain reached people all across the continent of Landia. Through compromise between the two parties, it went as follows:

1) The combined forces of the Great Tiger Empire and the Kingdom of Friedonia entered the Demon Lord's Domain and encountered entities known as demons deep inside the territory. Although brief skirmishes occurred, after a meeting with the demons' representative, Mao—previously thought to be Demon Lord Divalroi—an end to hostilities was reached.

2) Through exchanging information, it was learned that the demons are another race of mankind known as "Seadians" who came from far across the sea to the north. We are known to them as "Landians," as the people who inhabited the continent of Landia. The battle against the demons was a battle against mankind.

3) It was discovered that Seadians were also attacked by monsters, and they sought refuge in Landia. Through this, a point of common interest was found. The combined forces worked with Mao to seal the gate to another world from which the monsters first poured forth.

4) With the closing of the gate, the demon waves that used to come once in a decade will likely cease. Monsters will still exist in every region, but by working with the Seadians to eliminate them, it won't be long before they are completely exterminated.

5) Haalga, the city in the far north inhabited by Seadians, will be placed under a joint mandate of the Great Tiger Empire and Maritime Alliance and receive their combined protection.

The Great Tiger Empire wanted to hide that "Souma and Mao closed the gate to another world" from their people while stressing their own contributions.

Conversely, the Kingdom of Friedonia wanted to avoid Souma being celebrated as the hero who liberated the Demon Lord's Domain, fearing it might stir up the Great Tiger Kingdom and Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. If the truth of the matter became public, there was a risk that word of Souma's origin and the rights given to those of his bloodline would come to light.

The Empire's desire to stress their contributions and the Kingdom's desire to minimize theirs were in agreement. The announcement reflected both countries' intentions, but still sent a wave of euphoria across the continent.

When the people of Landia heard that the Demon Lord's Domain, which had tormented them for years, was now gone, and the demons (Seadians) had agreed to cease hostilities, they thought a time of peace was finally at hand.

Those driven from the north must have hoped they could return to their homes. However, those who thought critically of the feat remained uneasy. With the looming threat of the Demon Lord's Domain removed, the continent was divided into two camps: the Great Tiger Empire of Haan and their allies and the Maritime Alliance. With no common enemy, would the two factions be able to keep up friendly relations? Was a clash for supremacy brewing in the background? If anything, the people of the Great Tiger Empire were hoping for that.

Wouldn't the ever-victorious and undefeated (though you couldn't really call him that) Fuuga be able to pull off the unprecedented feat of uniting the continent? The Maritime Alliance was a large faction comprising the Kingdom of Friedonia, the Republic of Turgis, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom, and the Euphoria Kingdom. Any single one of these nations must have looked small and weak next to the Great Tiger Empire.

In the final stages of the Warring States period in China, when the Qin annexed the other six, wouldn't the people have hoped that the powerful Qin would be able to end the chaos and unite the seven as one?

In the chaos at the end of the Muromachi period, didn't the people wish for Nobunaga to unite the Land of the Rising Sun? And when he fell, did they not turn to Hideyoshi, then to Ieyasu after Hideyoshi's death?

Wouldn't the people, enraptured by the myth of the undefeatable Fuuga,

hope that he would subjugate the Maritime Alliance and unite the continent? The people had hoped for the emergence of a great man, and a great man arose to meet those hopes. Then the people wished for even more from the great man, and he rushed forward, amassing their hope in himself.

However, if he failed to fulfill those hopes, the people would abandon him.

In order to avoid being abandoned by the people, the great man had no choice but to continue moving forward, even if that meant taking drastic action. That was the fate of anyone who became great.

What the people of the Great Tiger Empire wanted now was a final showdown between the great Fuuga Haan and Souma E. Friedonia of the Maritime Alliance. That desire was transparent to the people of the Maritime Alliance, so an atmosphere of inevitable conflict brushed away the initial joy over the liberation of the Demon Lord's Domain.



After returning to Parnam from the northern edge of the continent, I quickly assembled the top brains of our country.

In the room was a reliable team consisting of Liscia; Prime Minister Hakuya, who had come here from the Euphoria Kingdom to watch the place while I was away; his successor Ichiha; Julius the White Strategist; Commander-in-Chief of the National Defense Force Excel and her second-in-command Ludwin; and Ludwin's advisor Kaede.

We explained to these members how Mao and I had closed the gate to another world, which meant a brief summary of the history of this world and the privileges given to those who bore my blood—the blood of the old humanity. Everyone who heard the story looked like either they wanted to clutch their head or they'd just bitten into something unpleasant.

"To think the burden would fall not just on Souma, but on the children too..." Liscia said with chagrin. I felt the same way.

The failures of the future people of Earth were being placed on children who didn't even know what Earth was, after all.

"After talking with Mao, I was able to shut down her more dangerous

functions like opening the gate to the northern hemisphere and creating new dungeons. I don't think my blood will be needed again immediately, but..."

"Still, your blood will be *necessary* for setting out into the northern hemisphere," Julius said, crossing his arms. "If the Kingdom of Lastania were still intact, I surely would have asked to adopt one of your and Roroa's children. I'd want the bloodline intact if anything should happen."

"Yes, that's true," Hakuya chimed in. "As the royal consort of the queen of Euphoria, the Euphoria Kingdom would like to adopt one of your and Maria's children too."

Even Hakuya's of the same mind, huh? I thought. *I understand the feeling, but give me a break.*

"Well, let's set aside the issue of the northern hemisphere for later. The problems to the south take priority," I said, causing Kaede to open her mouth with a sense of tension.

"You mean to say...Fuuga Haan will be attacking at long last."

"Well, those of the Maritime Alliance are the only countries left that can oppose him now," Excel said, hiding her mouth behind her fan. "Fuuga's country has gathered the people's support through constant growth. Though he's liberated the Demon Lord's Domain, should he stop progressing, they would soon begin facing internal discontent. That would quickly result in the outbreak of civil war, and maintaining the country would become difficult. Fuuga's empire might last until the end of his natural lifetime, but it would splinter not long after that."

"The fact of the matter is that his country has no choice but to fight, correct?" Ludwin asked with a sigh.

Fuuga had gotten his hands on competent administrators like Lumiere. Should he want to put in the effort and planning, he could probably prolong the life of his country beyond his death. But with his all-or-nothing personality, he couldn't make that decision.

"Fuuga wants to trust his fate to his own talents," I asserted. "He's a man of ambition, asking the world how far he can go. That's why he'll never stop. He's

sure to declare war on the Maritime Alliance, and his first target will be the Kingdom of Friedonia, which he considers the biggest threat.”

A wave of tense expressions washed over everyone in the room. No one took an optimistic view or stated a contrary position. They all understood that this was Fuuga’s true nature.

“He won’t stop his advance. Even if we were to drive him off repeatedly, he’d relentlessly pick himself back up, then come back for another go at us. The era—the people—want him. That is what it means to be Fuuga Haan. The hero born in this era is protected by the times we live in. That’s why, if we’re going to stop him, we need to change the era itself.”

The only way to defeat Fuuga was to lead the world towards an era in which people wouldn’t seek him.

“I think I know how to do just that. I realized this after we reached Haalga, the city ruled by Mao, leader of the Seadians. Please listen closely to what I’m about to say...”

I went on to explain the method for defeating Fuuga that I’d found in Haalga. Everyone cocked their heads to the side at some points as I spoke, but with enough explanation, they got it.

“I see. Is that how it is?” Excel gave me a smile that showed she wasn’t entirely unhappy about it. “You told me it wasn’t a matter of tactics or strategy in Haalga, but... Yes, I’d certainly agree this isn’t either of those. Hee hee! If you can pull it off, I’m sure the people of the Great Tiger Empire won’t be able to respond.”

“It’s definitely an effective move. If it works, I expect Fuuga and Hashim will have a lot of hard thinking to do,” Julius agreed. But he cocked his head to the side and added, “However...won’t it take time to put it into practice?”

“Yeah... I’m told it’ll be another half a year,” I said.

“Fuuga can’t move until he rallies popular sentiment, but he’ll likely attack as soon as he’s prepared to. He’s not going to wait for us to be ready.”

“That’s why we need to buy all the time we can.”

Ichihai, who'd been listening all this time, hesitantly raised a hand. Being the youngest one surrounded by all these experienced people, he must have felt pretty nervous.

"Ichihai?" I called his name. He seemed to find his resolve and stepped forward.

"Um... In that case, I think we can only resort to a strategy of delays. Even if Fuuga attacks, we must make it difficult to fight a decisive battle. If we defend the borders, that will quickly result in a decisive battle, so I think we need to evade at some times, defend at others, and slowly pull back."

That style of fighting entailed considerable pain on our part. However, there likely wasn't any other way for us to buy time against the Great Tiger Empire. Being able to give a realistic opinion like this, even if it wasn't easy to hear, showed that he was growing into his role as Hakuya's successor.

"Yeah. That's why I wanted to gather everyone here to work out our strategy and tactics with that policy in mind. The brains of this country are here in this very room. I'm hoping you all can come up with better strategies than I can."

Everyone nodded as I said this. Then Hakuya raised his hand.

"If that's what this is about, then there are two individuals I would like to have join us at command headquarters."

"Hmm? I don't mind. Who are you calling in?"

Hakuya smirked. "Some people you know quite well, sire."



Days later, in the new city of Venetionova...

"And that's why I want you to head to Parnam posthaste."

There was a person Weist Garreau, the lord of this city, had personally summoned to his office. This person came without knowing why he'd been called, and had just been handed a royal command from King Souma to appear at the castle.

The man looked dumbfounded for a moment, but cried out in surprise as soon as he comprehended what was being demanded of him. "Wh-Whaaat?!"

Wh-Why me?!”

Weist gave the man the written order, then patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

“His Majesty and the Black-Robed Prime Minister want you. Isn’t that an honor? I hope you’ll do your best for them as a representative of this city, Sir Urup.”

“...”

Urup’s mouth hung open wordlessly as he stared at Weist’s affable smile, which had caused even Sovereign Prince Gaius of Amidonia to lower his guard.



Chapter 1: Petty Trickery Runs in the Family

When the new city of Venetিনova was being built in the 1546th year of the Continental Calendar, Old Man Urup had told Souma the Legend of the Sea God, which warned of the dangers of a tsunami.

After his meeting with Souma, the city's plans were changed. Urup moved to Venetინova, where he continued his job as a fisherman while also working as a storyteller on the side, telling people the legends and what to do in the event of a tsunami.

As the years went by, the harsh labor of fishing pushed Urup's stamina to its limits. Eventually, he came to leave that work to his children and grandchildren in order to focus on his work as a storyteller. He went around to the daycare facilities—modeled after the one in Parnam Castle—and told his tales to children. After doing this for some time, he had a thought one day.

There must be legends warning about natural disasters in every region. Ones not just about tsunamis, but also about landslides in the mountains and valleys, and flooding near the rivers on the flatlands. Near the forests, they have dangerous beasts too. Do all of those legends...really have storytellers of their own?

Because of knowledge from his former world, Souma had recognized the value of Urup's Legend of the Sea God and placed a good deal of importance on it. However, in contrast, up until he met Souma, Urup hadn't known the value of the legend he'd been recounting. It was possible that when his life came to an end, the legend would be lost. And if no one knew the legend when the day of calamity came, how many lives would be lost?

I shudder to think of it. And I can't bear to see the legends our ancestors went to all the trouble of leaving us just fade away, unnoticed...

At this point, Urup had a flash of inspiration.

Old as he was, it wouldn't be odd for him to keel over any day now. That

being the case, he'd devote his remaining time to gathering legends and becoming the teller of all of them. With this decision made, Urup acted fast. He immediately drafted a letter to Souma explaining his thoughts. The time spent learning to read and write after retiring from his life as a fisherman was well worth it.

“‘To His Royal Highness, although I cannot resist the waves of time, nor can I row out to sea any longer, I now take up this pen in hopes of carrying out one last task.’ Ha!” Souma laughed out loud after reading the opening line of the letter, not caring who heard. “Old Urup’s going to become a folklorist, huh? He’s still got a lot of energy!”

Wiping away his tears as Liscia and the rest looked astonished, Souma began writing a letter of approval on the spot, and promised to fund the endeavor. Moreover, he also issued a certificate that said Urup’s research was sanctioned by the king and that people were to cooperate with him. He even arranged for Juno, Dece, and other trustworthy adventurers to escort the old man on his travels.

Later, this letter from Urup was donated to the museum in the capital and became one of its main exhibits. But that’s another story...

“Hey, Old Man Urup. I brought a letter for you from the king.”

“Oh, girlie! Hurry, hurry, and show it to me!”

After reading the reply sent along with Juno and the other adventurers, Urup went to his family. They were reasonably concerned about his recent tendency to do things that were dangerous at his age, but he wouldn’t let that slow him down.

“I’m off for now!” he announced, and departed on his journey.

“Okay, where to first, old man?” Juno asked.

Urup rubbed his mustache and said, “Disasters involving water are scary, so first we’ll go along the coast, then along the rivers, I suppose. After that, it’ll be the mountains. Once I’ve gathered legends from all over, we’ll have to return to Venetino so I can compile them.”

“That sounds incredibly time-consuming...”

“Of course. I intend to spend the rest of my life doing it.”

With that, Urup began walking in high spirits.

Normally, escort jobs were from one village to the next. Juno and the others would join him when it suited their plans. In the cases where it didn't suit them, Urup would be accompanied by other trusted adventurers from the guild who'd received a request from the kingdom.

There were those who were suspicious of Urup and his entourage asking around about local legends, but seeing King Souma's written certificate made them quickly change their attitudes and cooperate. People who saw Urup's encounters spread stories about them that were exaggerated in amusing ways. In later years, there was even a play called *Old Urup's Tour* in which he somewhat resembled a certain old retired ruler from the Mito region.

Incidentally, the members who accompanied him in that play, like Suke and Kaku in the original, were always members of Juno's party. (Even though they weren't always the ones traveling with him...but that's getting too far off-topic.)

This was how Urup traveled all around the country, investigating myths and folk stories that remained as lessons from each region. Eventually, he would return to Venetinoa to compile them before setting out again to investigate more legends. His edited compilations were submitted to the country as a form of report, and Souma and Hakuya were satisfied with the work he was doing.

One day, after this had been going on for some years...

Upon returning to Venetinoa to compile the most recent batch of stories, Urup received a summons from Lord Weist Garreau and was given an order from Souma to appear at Parnam Castle. The next day, a wyvern gondola arrived to take him to the capital, and in no time at all, Urup became a man of the sky.

D-Did I do something to offend him? Was there something in my report that the king or prime minister didn't like?

The gondola was a spacious one in the service of the royal family, but Urup

huddled in one corner of it. As he asked himself how it had come to this, the gondola continued its journey. Before he knew it, they had landed in the courtyard of Parnam Castle.

“You must be Master Urup. How good of you to come,” the head maid, Serina, politely greeted Urup as he hesitantly disembarked from the gondola.

Although connected to King Souma, Urup was still a commoner. He was flabbergasted at being welcomed like some kind of noble or minister.

Serina gestured to her right with the palm of her right hand. “Please, come this way.”

Urup followed her lead without a word. He was used to Souma and some of the others at this point, but even the castle’s halls looked so formal to him that he was left feeling nervous. He walked until he was taken to a room.

“Please wait in here for a moment,” Serina said, bowing, then taking her leave.

In addition to being decorated with paintings and other art, the room also had two large comfy red sofas. This seemed to be a waiting chamber of sorts.

“I-Is it okay if I sit down...?”

Urup, being a bit of a miser, hesitated to sit on something so opulent. After struggling for some time, he heard a voice from the other side of the door.

“Please wait in this room for a moment. His Majesty will be with you shortly,” they said.

The door cracked open, and he caught a glimpse of the dragonewt maid Carla on the other side.

Then suddenly, a person barged into the room. They were a large bearded man who looked even more out of place in the castle than Urup did.

Who’s this guy? He looks like a bandit to me, Urup thought.

Their eyes met, and the big man said, “Hm? Were you called in by the king too, old man?”

“I’m Urup, here from Venetanova. Who’s asking?”

If the big man were to get violent in this room, he could snap the old man in half. However, Urup puffed out his chest, not wanting to lose to him in attitude, at least.

Seeing how Urup was acting, and sensing he'd scared the old man, the big man scratched the back of his head with an awkward smile.

"The name's Gonzales. I'm the captain of the mountain rescue team. I got a sudden call from the king today... You too, old man?"

"Yes...I did." Feeling the man wasn't any danger to him, Urup relaxed his guard. "I heard about the mountain rescue team when I traveled around villages in the mountains. His Majesty set them up to look out for and rescue people who got lost. Many of the members are former mountain bandits who left that life of crime, but they're trusted by people because they know the mountains well and are willing to go anywhere to help people."

"Heh heh... You're making me blush here," Gonzales said, not seeming to mind in the slightest. A smile made anyone seem a little more charming, but he had the charm of a bear that was totally relaxed.

"You were called in too, right, old man? Have you heard anything?"

"No, I don't know the details yet either..."

As the two were talking, the door opened, and Souma entered the room with Hakuya in tow.

"Old Man Urup, Gonzales. Sorry for calling you in on such short notice," Souma said casually.

"Thank you for taking the trouble," Hakuya added, bowing his head.

"Y-Your Majesty!"

"The king... Oh, sorry."

In response to their king's sudden appearance, Urup hurriedly prostrated himself, while Gonzales dropped to one knee in a way that he didn't seem familiar with doing.

With a wry smile at both of their reactions, Souma said, "No, no. Don't feel pressured to act formally. Come on, stand up, you two."

The two men rose to their feet, unsure what to make of this.

Souma smiled and told them, “Thank you both for coming. There’s something I really need both of you to help with.”

Urup and Gonzales looked at one another.

After that, Urup and Gonzales were led to another room that was a little dark due to a lack of windows.

In the center of the room, occupying most of the space, was a large object they couldn’t quite make out. Upon closer inspection, the two men realized it was a scale model of the Kingdom of Friedonia. It depicted the relative positions of the villages, towns, and cities, and even recreated the heights of the mountains.

Urup and Gonzales gulped at the sight. The model’s accuracy was uncanny.

Having traversed the country investigating legends, Urup could tell how accurate it was. Gonzales knew it too, as he’d traveled the mountains as part of his rescue operations. Even detailed maps were a closely guarded secret, so this elaborate model wasn’t the sort of thing that common folk like them would be allowed to see under normal circumstances.

“Wh-What is this...?”

“Just what it looks like. A scale model of this country,” answered Hakuya, who was already in the room.

Looking around, they saw that National Defense Force Commander-in-Chief Excel and Julius the White Strategist were also present.

This was the second war room in Parnam Castle, the place they’d planned the relief of the Gran Chaos Empire not long ago.

Finally returning to his senses, dripping sweat, Gonzales said, “So...why’d you go and show this to *us*? Isn’t this a national secret?”

“Hee hee! Yes, it is. If you were to try to take it out of here, you’d be disposed of in secret.” Excel laughed with her mouth hidden behind her fan. She was smiling, but this was no laughing matter for the two guests.

The invited men were dripping cold sweat. Why had they been called here, and what in the world would happen to them?

“Excel. Please don’t scare them,” Souma chided, causing Excel to playfully stick out her tongue.

It looked just like when her granddaughter Juna made the same gesture after a bit of mischief.

“Good grief,” Souma said, his shoulders slumping. Then, clapping his hands together, he tried to get back on track. “Now then, as for why you’re both here, Hakuya tells me he wants to borrow some of your wisdom.”

“Indeed,” Hakuya said, stepping forward. “You are both in possession of specialist knowledge. Sir Gonzales knows the mountains of this country like the back of his hand. And while gathering legends about disasters involving water, Sir Urup has learned enough he could fairly be called an expert on flood control. I would like to have the two of you lend us your knowledge for the sake of this country.”

With that, Hakuya gave them an explanation of the situation this country found itself in.

The only faction that could oppose the Great Tiger Empire of Haan was the Maritime Alliance, and with the north stabilized, Fuuga was expected to invade this country in the not too distant future. Most of the people of this country were relieved that the threat of the Demon Lord’s Domain was gone, and a time of peace had come at last, so this revelation came as a rude awakening to both of them.

“Th-That’s what’s happening?” Gonzales said, bewildered.

“It sure sounds rough...” Urup said, adding, “But now I’m even less sure what you called us here for...”

Hakuya smiled a little as he placed his hand on the scale model.

“Think of the Great Tiger Kingdom’s forces like water rushing towards us. They move faster when moving from higher ground to lower, and they lose momentum going in the opposite direction. If they’re split up, they lose their vigor, and if they join together, they gain it. Water and armies are the same in

that respect. Because places water can pass through easily are also easily traversable by people.”

Having said this, Hakuya looked at Urup and continued.

“Sir Urup. In your reports, you pointed out areas at risk of harm despite not having legends, correct? That’s because, based on the legends you’ve gathered so far, you have an instinctive understanding of where water easily accumulates. If we liken the invading force to water, then wouldn’t you be able to tell us where they’ll move based on this scale model?”

“Well...” Urup trailed off, but as he did, he simulated the flow of water over the scale model in front of him.

How will the water move if it comes across the northern border? he thought. It will split at that mountain, then join up again in that basin. If it takes that narrow path, it will reach a dead end, but down that other route, it will be a smooth path to the capital.

“No, no...” Urup shook his head as he was running his mental simulation. “It’s true, I can tell how it would move on this scale model, but the actual mountain roads aren’t this simple. There must be roads you can’t represent with this.”

Hakuya nodded. “Yes. Which is why I’ve also called Sir Gonzales.”

“M-Me?” Gonzales pointed at himself with his index finger.

“Indeed.” Hakuya nodded. “As captain of the mountain rescue team, you’ve learned a great deal about the many mountains in this country. Probably as much as the people who live in the area.”

“Hrm... Well, I’m sure I’ve climbed more mountains than anyone in the country.” Gonzales scratched the back of his head.

Hakuya nodded again before continuing. “Sir Gonzales, you are highly knowledgeable about the kind of hidden paths through the mountains that Sir Urup pointed out as an issue, as well as the game trails that wild beasts use. If we have your knowledge to make up for the shortcomings of this scale model, then Sir Urup can likely work out an accurate path for the invasion.”

“I see. Hence why you called these two,” Julius said, impressed, then crossing

his arms. “Fuuga will have no choice but to use a large army to invade this country. The people here have a higher quality of life, and with daily broadcasts to enlighten the population, it won’t be as easy for them to use propaganda as it was against the Empire. With no choice but to launch a frontal invasion with a large army, the paths his forces are able to take will be limited.”

“And if we can narrow down the routes they might take, then preparing countermeasures becomes easier,” Excel said, closing her fan. “As Sir Ichiha said earlier, we need to use delaying tactics. The places where water would pool are the places where it’s easiest to deploy a military force, so they will be hard to defend, leading to their abandonment. But the places where the water has to split are easy to defend, so we hold those key points so the Great Tiger Empire can’t deploy their forces there.”

“Correct,” Hakuya confirmed. “At the same time, if we utilize the knowledge these two have, we can prevent the enemy from using routes we aren’t aware of to get around behind us.”

Urup and Gonzales were still as confused as ever, but all the smart people in the room seemed satisfied with this explanation.

Souma, who had been listening until this point, said, “I get what Hakuya is thinking. Urup, Gonzales.”

“Y-Yes, sire!”

“What is it?”

Bowing his head, Souma answered, “Please lend the country your wisdom.”

Seeing the king bow made the two panic even more. There was no refusing at this point, or hesitating for that matter.

“R-Raise your head, sire! If this feeble old man can be of help, then I’ll do anything you ask of me!”

“Yeah, sire! I owe you one for helping me get out of the mountain bandit business too. If what I know can be useful, then let me help you out!”

“Thanks, both of you.” With their assistance secured, Souma raised his head and smiled.

This was how Urup and Gonzales came to join the Kingdom of Friedonia's second war room, and they began shoring up the defenses against the coming invasion.

"Sir Prime Minister, there's a path on this mountain. It's not wide enough for horses, but men could cross it on foot."

"Hmm. We could position troops as a precaution, or perhaps use it to ambush their rear units," Hakuya said.

"This basin here is wide open, but on the western side, it slopes upward towards the south. The water would pool here, but it would struggle to flow south. If anything, it ought to drain out the eastern side."

"I see how it is. In that case, it's a place where the enemy's advance will be uneven. Sir Julius?" Excel asked.

"You're probably right," Julius replied. "I thought we might have to abandon this point if we couldn't defend it, but it might be better to put up a hard defense here and blunt their advance."

"Hee hee! Yes, that's true. I think we could do some damage if a unit charged in from the east."

The head of the mountain rescue team and a storyteller were joining strategy meetings with the prime minister, strategist, and commander-in-chief, and their opinions held equal weight. Their debates continued day and night, and their proposed delaying tactics grew more and more refined. This situation was probably the "turtle with many snakes for tails that attack regardless of the turtle's intentions" that Fuuga had feared.

And this sort of phenomenon was occurring in other places too.

Since its inception, the learning hub of the capital known as Ginger's Vocational School had steadily grown in popularity. With the construction of additional buildings to match its ever-growing scale, the name had since changed to Ginger's College.

Today, many young women clad in white robes were gathered in one of the lecture halls.

A woman standing at the front of the crowd asked, “Is everyone ready?”

““““Yes, Saint Mary.””””

The response caused Mary to let out a troubled little laugh. “I’ve told you I’m not a saint anymore, and all of you are *former* saint candidates now, aren’t you?”

They were the members of the Lunaria Girls’ Choir, composed of former saint candidates who’d fled the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State.

The choir girls showered Mary with looks of admiration as if she were their big sister.

“No, Lady Mary, you were the one who saved us from the Orthodox Papal State!”

“You are our savior!”

“No matter what anyone says, you will always be a saint to us!”

Hearing these words paired with their adoring gazes, Mary didn’t know how to respond.

“Ha ha ha! Why not just let ’em worship you if they want to? I don’t see the harm,” came a voice in a very casual tone.

Mary glared at the speaker. “You say that as if it’s so simple, Your Holiness Archbishop Souji...”

“Hey, hey, don’t go glaring at me,” Souji said, spreading his arms wide. “This is undoubtedly the result of your own actions. I hear with Fuuga’s supporters currently holding sway in the Orthodox Papal State, there’s a rain of blood as they carry out constant purges in the name of hunting heretics. If these girls had stayed in the country, they would’ve fallen victim to the hunters. Those supporters want to cement the authority of Fuuga’s saint, so the existence of other candidates is nothing but a nuisance to them.”

“Fuuga’s saint... You mean Anne, I suppose?”

Mary’s expression clouded over. She had extended her hand to Anne when they were going to escape from the Orthodox Papal State but had been refused. Anne was one of those she’d failed to save. Or rather, if the girl chose this for

herself, perhaps it was wrong to think of it as failing to save her.

Anne... What are you thinking now? What do you feel when you see the blood that flows at your feet? Does it not break your heart? As one who wanted to live a life of being needed by people, and is now used as a prop to support another's authority...

As Mary was thinking this, Souji suddenly clasped his hands around her temples and shook her head.

"W-Wait, what are you doing? Please stop," Mary protested, but Souji just chuckled.

"Well, you *know*...you just had such a sour look on your face. I thought I'd give it a bit of a stir."

"Don't shake me like that. Jeez, look what a mess you've made of my hair."

Freeing herself from Souji's grasp, she puffed out her cheeks as she fixed her disheveled hair.

Seeing her expression, Souji laughed and said, "Yeah, that's more like it! Openly displaying your emotions suits you far better than a brooding expression."

"Who asked you...?"

"If you look gloomy, it makes a whole lot of people uneasy," he said, pointing behind her with a gesture of his chin.

Mary turned and saw the former saints looking at her with concern. *Why?* she thought.

"See? It means you're a big, important saint to those girls now," Souji affirmed. "Whether you recognize it or not, they respect and adore you. If someone you love and respect looked like they were in pain, you'd get worried too, wouldn't you?"

"That can't be right. I'm not that big of a deal..." Mary tried to act humble, but the more than twenty-four pairs of eyes aimed in her direction told her otherwise.

It was hard to be excessively humble in front of all of them. If they had

expectations of her, it was natural human compassion to not want to disappoint them.

“I guess at some point...I did become that big of a deal.”

“A degenerate priest like me managed to become archbishop, after all. People change when the world or the environment they find themselves in changes. The key thing is to think with your own head—stand on your own feet—no matter where you find yourself. Whether going with the flow or fighting against it, there’s meaning in deciding your own path to take.”

“Your Holiness...”

Think for yourself, huh?

If Anne had chosen to be a saint, just as Mary had chosen to free herself from the chains being a saint imposed on her, then perhaps there was no reason to worry herself over it. Perhaps Mary ought to recognize Anne’s choice as one of the few who knew the suffering it entailed. No matter how people of the present, or the future, would view the path she was taking.

Mary’s expression softened. “I have to hand it to you, Your Holiness. You have a knack for leading stray lambs back to the path.”

Hearing this compliment, Souji rubbed his smooth head and laughed. “Ha ha ha! I’ve always been more of a mutton man than a lamb man, but somehow I keep helping out lost little lambs. It’s a crying shame.”

“Oh, but a certain sloth bear is always being helped by lambs. If it weren’t for Miss Merula and me, the archbishop’s office would quickly become so cluttered there’d be nowhere to stand, and your prestige would have long since fallen to the ground, Your Holiness.”

“I see you’ve learned to hold your own, young lady...”

Having been specifically asked by King Souma to look after Souji, Mary managed much of his daily life. Because Souji was the face of the Kingdom’s Lunarian Orthodoxy, the loss of his authority would have a negative effect on all Lunarian Orthodox believers in the country. In the process of strictly overseeing his activities, she’d formed a joint front with Merula the high elf, who lived rent-free in his house in exchange for cleaning the place.

Merula had once been declared a witch by the Orthodox Papal State, and Mary had been in a position that required her to condemn Merula, but now they'd bonded over the goal of reforming Souji. Thanks to the two of them (and a change of mentality on his own part), he was living a healthier lifestyle.

In regards to this, Souma had said, "You know, Kingdom Orthodoxy doesn't forbid its men of the cloth from marrying, so take them both as your wives," which Souji frowned at.

The former saint candidates smiled as they watched this exchange between archbishop and saint, in which it wasn't clear who had the upper hand.

Suddenly, a low, gentlemanly voice echoed through the hall. "Ahh, *ahem*. Are you both done?"

The source was a man with a walrus-like face wearing a tuxedo, standing beside the college's president—Ginger—and his wife, Sandria.

This was Morse, a member of the walrus race (composed of walrus beastmen), one of the Five Races of the Snowy Plains in the Republic, and also the representative of the Labor Songs Society. Following the success of the East and West Real Song Battle, Morse had followed the path of music and was now the conductor of the Lunaria Girls' Choir.

With a wry smile, Morse said, "It's about time we started the experiment. Sir Ginger, is everything ready for us to begin?"

"Yes. The jewel that we borrowed from His Majesty is showing this lecture hall now," Ginger said, gesturing to the jewel set up by the entrance. "The feed is viewable not just in this country but in all the nations of the Maritime Alliance. The experiment is to determine whether participants in each city can heal the wounded through listening to this presentation of the Lunaria Girls' Choir singing."

Lunarian Orthodoxy's secret art, Area Heal, involved the church's light mages revitalizing a large number of ailing people all at once through song.

The recent Real Song Battle had demonstrated that mental images were important to the efficacy of magic, and that songs effectively gave the caster the right visualization. That being the case, this experiment was to test whether

listening to hymns over the broadcast would have a buffing effect on healing magic. Genia, Merula, and the other geniuses of the Kingdom believed there was a good chance it would. Their view was that the effect would likely be lesser than if listening to the singers in person, but the imagery of the song wouldn't be lessened by the broadcast.

If this hypothesis proved correct, each country of the Maritime Alliance could use its broadcast channels to assist with healing the wounded on a global scale whenever there was combat. Even if the other side noticed these broadcasts, the Maritime Alliance could signal one another to change their frequencies to prevent enemy use, so it was expected to be a major advantage.

Once Ginger explained the experiment's intention, Sandria stepped forward and said, "So, basically, your bantering has been visible to the entire world. Might I suggest you keep the flirting confined to your own home?"

"Uh, no, we haven't been flirting," Souji protested, but Mary turned her face downward, blushing in embarrassment. The former saint candidates squealed with glee at their reactions.

Then a clapping sound echoed through the room.

"Okay, okay, that's enough. It's rather uncouth to nose into other people's love lives," Morse said in his deep sonorous voice.

"Right!" the former saint candidates replied enthusiastically.

Souji seemed to want to say something, but couldn't because he understood it would be stirring up a hornet's nest. Mary, on the other hand, was covering her face and wishing there was a hole she could crawl into.

With a wry smile at their predicament, Morse raised his baton. "Now then, everyone. Shall we begin?"

""""Yes.""""

And so, the Area Heal broadcast experiment began.

The result was a success, as anticipated. Souma and the others were delighted when they heard the report, and they ordered Ginger and his team to continue experimenting.

Chapter 2: New Year's in Both Camps

— End of the 1553rd Year, Continental Calendar —

The people of each country were holding big feasts to celebrate the end of the year, which would be remembered as the year of the Demon Lord's Domain's liberation. Freed from the worry that had haunted them for decades, they were no doubt dreaming of a brighter future. In our country, Juna was heading up the preparations for the annual Song Battle (this one wasn't for research, but was something like the New Year's Red and White Song Battle).

However, in contrast to the people's celebratory mood, the political and military leaders of the countries of the Maritime Alliance couldn't afford to be in such high spirits. With public opinion in the Great Tiger Empire hardening, the Kingdom of Friedonia was certain that an invasion of the Maritime Alliance was imminent. They had communicated these worries to their three allies—the Republic of Turgis, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom, the Euphoria Kingdom—and to the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, who was outside the alliance but had recently been interacting with them as part of their delivery business.

It was necessary to have the others assist with the plan, so I'd been taking the time to explain what I'd heard in the depths of the Demon Lord's Domain, including how this world came to be, and about the northern hemisphere.

Today I was having a meeting with Kuu, Shabon, and Jeanne—the heads of state of the four nations of the Maritime Alliance—over the broadcast. Once everyone was ready, I spoke first.

"All right, let's get this meeting started."

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Okay."

Once I saw the other three nod, I nodded and turned to Kuu.

“First up...Kuu.”

“Hm? What’s up, Bro?”

“I hear you’ve conceived your first through fourth children. Congratulations.”

“Ookyakya. You’re making me feel embarrassed.” Kuu bashfully scratched the back of his head as Shabon and Jeanne both chimed in with congratulations of their own.

He was still emotional over suddenly becoming a father of four. In fact, Kuu had only learned of both Taru’s and Leporina’s pregnancies just the other day. Furthermore, Leporina was apparently pregnant with triplets, with her belly already a considerable size. The white rabbit race was known for its fecundity, so he could have seen this coming.

Trying to get things back on track, Kuu grinned and shook his head.

“Well, that’s how it is. With four kids, at least some of them’ll get along with yours, Bro. Let’s get them engaged to Kazuha, Enju, or Kaito.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself when they’re not even born yet...”

There’d be a six-year age gap with Kazuha... That was well within the acceptable range for this world, but I wanted to avoid a marriage that the parties involved didn’t agree with.

“Well...” Kuu began, shaking his head. “Now that you’ve told us how important your blood of old mankind is, Bro, the Republic wants a piece of that bloodline for itself. The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago has the betrothal between Cian and Sharan, while the Euphoria Kingdom just needs you to have a kid with their former empress. As head of the Republic, I can’t accept us getting nothing.”

I can see where he’s coming from... I’d have felt the same way in Kuu’s position.

“Fair enough. Once your kids are born and grown a little, let’s have them all meet each other. If there are any pairs that get along, then I think it’s fine to arrange a marriage for them.”

“Yeah! I’ll hold you to that, Bro,” Kuu said with a broad grin.

Jeanne nodded in agreement. “It’s true; we’d like the blood of the old mankind as well. Once you have children with my sister, we would like to adopt one of them.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself too, Madam Jeanne...”

“Oh! Just Jeanne is fine, *Brother.*”

Come to think of it, she’s my sister-in-law now. After Tomoe, that makes her my second sister-in-law.

“Anyway... I should apologize, Jeanne. For calling Hakuya away so often when you just got married.”

“I understand.” Jeanne smiled wryly and shook her head. “You don’t have much choice given the current situation.”

“It helps to hear you say that...”

“Honestly, it’s not my husband that concerns me... With Sir Hakuya out of the country, I’m more worried about what nonsense Trill might pull. She’s hard at work developing something to blow off steam over being separated from Madam Genia.”

The Drill Princess is the same as ever, huh? I thought.

Jeanne let out an exhausted sigh. “Earlier she was saying, ‘Just defending the castle alone lacks a certain pizzazz! Would you not agree that it’d be nice to have a castle that can thoroughly crush our enemies?’ and then she started remodeling the castle walls.”

“R-Right...”

“That said, Sir Hakuya does go through her inventions and picks up any that might be of use, so she *has* been making major contributions to our country’s technology...”

“Ookyakya! Miss Trill’s as entertaining as ever, I see! I’d love for her to come to our country and help remodel the city we stole from Zem!”

“She’s all yours,” Jeanne said with a gesture like she was passing him something.

Though Trill and Kuu had met during the tunnel construction, it felt like they could make a dangerous combination.

“Sir Souma...”

“Hm?”

At this point, Shabon, who had been listening quietly all this time with a serene expression, sat up straight and bowed her head to me.

“I must apologize for how my country’s fleet disgraced itself during the campaign to the Demon Lord’s Domain.”

“Oh... That, huh?”

When we sent a fleet to the Demon Lord’s Domain at Fuuga’s request, Shabon had sent a Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago fleet to escort us. However, when we encountered the humanoid weapon Jangar, one of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago ships had disregarded orders not to start anything and attacked Jangar, causing an outbreak of hostilities. We’d lost an island carrier in that battle, and there had been no shortage of casualties.

I’d already received one apology from her since returning to the Kingdom, but this was the first time she said it in an official capacity.

“Those who disobeyed orders will be punished under the laws of our country, but I must apologize for the failures of those under my command.”

“Raise your head, Shabon. We hadn’t predicted that situation. It’s my own fault for letting Fuuga push me into dispatching the fleet. I hear that most of the deaths were in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago fleet, so if you say you’ve already taken care of it, then I have nothing more to say on the matter.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

“The more important thing right now is I have a favor to ask of the three of you.”

“You’re talking about Fuuga Haan, right?” Kuu asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “It’s more or less guaranteed that we’ll have to fight a decisive battle against the Great Tiger Empire next year.”

“That’s what Sir Hakuya has been telling me. He says it’s almost certain they’ll invade the Kingdom of Friedonia,” Jeanne said, causing Kuu to cock his head to the side.

“Ookya? Is it safe to say that so definitely? My country borders the former Mercenary State Zem but is far from the enemy’s homeland, and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom is across the sea. It makes sense that we’re not the targets here, but doesn’t the Euphoria Kingdom need to worry too?”

“That would take too much time. As long as we have the plan I told you all about, time is on our side. If Fuuga launches a genuine offensive into the Euphoria Kingdom, we’ll disrupt it with everything we’ve got. While Fuuga is dealing with that, he’ll probably run out of time... It wouldn’t be nice for Jeanne, as her country would be invaded, but on the whole, we couldn’t ask for a better outcome than that.”

After saying all that, I let out a sigh before continuing.

“But that man’s risen up as far as he has because he’s got a nose for danger. It’s inhuman, on the level of a wild beast. He’s got to realize we’re up to something. I hear that the covert agents who report directly to Hashim have been getting more active lately.”

“You mean to say he will discover that plan and invade the Kingdom of Friedonia in order to crush it?” Shabon asked.

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod. “But it’s less that he’ll detect it and more likely that he’ll just think ‘something’s up.’ A quick and decisive war is what we least want to see right now. And as that’s the case, it’s the policy Fuuga will pursue without hesitation. If we hope he’ll take things in a different direction and are lax in our preparations as a result, he might just gobble everything up.”

“Ookeekee... Hell of a guy to be born in the same era as, huh?” Kuu said with a strained smile.

You said it.

In a certain *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* manga adaptation, there’s a scene in which, after being outwitted by Kongming, Zhou Yu says, “Why did

Heaven give birth to Zhou Yu, then give birth to Kongming in the same era?" before dying in a fit of anger. If I had been forced to go up against Fuuga on my own, maybe I'd have felt the same way.

"But we're not facing Fuuga alone."

We had bonds built and cultivated with other people. Some of our comrades had been friends from the beginning, while others like Castor, Julius, and Mary had once been enemies. At some point, all those people had formed a loose alliance, and before any of us knew it, we were cooperating towards the same goal. This was the strength of the Maritime Alliance.

I thrust my fist towards the three of them to show my enthusiasm.

"We'll work together to overcome this difficulty and close the curtain on this era of Fuuga in the spotlight. Let's show him what we've built and how resilient it is."

"Yeah! I'm itching for the fight!"

""Yes!""

Kuu, Shabon, Jeanne, and I all raised fists with a hurrah.





Around the same time, Fuuga was also ringing in the new year at Haan Castle...

Following his return from the Demon Lord's Domain, he spent some time firming up things on the domestic front. The Demon Lord's Domain was now fully liberated and under the Great Tiger Empire's control, except for the city at the northern edge of the continent where the Seadians lived.

Anyone looking at the situation properly likely thought he'd been pushed into a bunch of wasteland. However, to many of his people, as well as the refugees who could finally return to their homelands, it seemed like a brilliant accomplishment. Even if the long, arduous work of rebuilding awaited these revelers, they would go about the task with glee. And those who would complain refrained from doing so. The strength of Fuuga's charisma was overwhelming.

Troops were sent to his new lands and set to work ridding the continent of Landia of the remaining monsters. It was impossible to completely eliminate them, as dungeons still existed, but the number wouldn't increase since Souma and Mao had closed the gate.

The domain of mankind would definitely expand farther. But simply hunting down monsters was of little interest to the planning trickery of Fuuga's strategist Hashim, so the task was left to Shuukin and other competent retainers instead.

Fuuga, meanwhile, took this opportunity to have some long-awaited quality downtime with his wife, Mutsumi. On reflection, this might have been the most peaceful period of Fuuga's life to this point. The time he'd lived through had been otherwise filled with violence.

However, peace was unfulfilling for the great man.

At night in his bedroom, Fuuga sat in a chair naked from the waist up as he polished his sword. His favored weapon was the Zanganto, a rock-rendering blade that resembled the Green Dragon Crescent Blade. It was rare for him to draw this sword that hung at his hip, but in the long time he spent fighting, it still

managed to get chipped here and there.

“You can’t sleep...?”

Fuuga turned towards the sudden voice. Mutsumi was sitting up in bed with a blanket wrapped around her and nothing underneath.

With a wry smile, he turned to her and said, “Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“No...I was just drifting off when I realized that my husband wasn’t beside me.”

“Yeah. I feel wide awake for some reason.”

Fuuga held his sword up to the moonlight shining through the window. The polished blade reflected his face and the scar given to him by Mutsumi’s brother Gauche.

He sighed. “When it’s too quiet, I just can’t settle down. I feel like I ought to be doing something, I guess.”

“Madam Lumiere would probably tell you to help her with internal affairs,” Mutsumi said.

Lumiere was likely working harder than anyone in order to make the expanded territories contribute to the Great Tiger Empire’s national power as soon as possible. Fuuga understood that, but while he wasn’t exactly ill-suited to domestic affairs, he didn’t find the work satisfying. Unlike Souma or Maria, he never worked overtime or slept in his governmental affairs office. That work fell to Lumiere and Kasen, who had been assigned to assist her.

“I’m grateful to them. Running around on the battlefield suits me better.”

“Even now that you’re an emperor, you’re still a warrior at heart, darling,” Mutsumi murmured, chuckling.

She wrapped the blanket around her naked body and rose from the bed. She approached Fuuga from behind and threw her arms around him.

“I know it’s hot in these parts, but the nights still get chilly,” she said, inviting Fuuga to join her inside the blanket. He didn’t really resist.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“No, no. I can’t let my darling catch a cold when he wants to keep racing onward.”

Fuuga got a slightly troubled look on his face when she said this. “Even if the only place left for me to go...is towards the south?”

“I suppose...”

To the south of the Great Tiger Empire were the countries of the Maritime Alliance. Fuuga’s little sister, Yuriga, resided there, as did Mutsumi’s siblings—Ichiha, Nike, and Sami. Mutsumi understood this, of course. But still...she nuzzled up against Fuuga’s bearded cheek.

“If you say you will continue, I will come with you. Until I’ve seen what end your epic tale reaches.”

“Oh, yeah?”

He touched Mutsumi’s cheek, which was next to his face. The two spent some time holding one another close after that.



And so the new year came. The people of the Great Tiger Empire met it with incredible elation. Basking in the glory that their emperor Fuuga Haan, the greatest man of this generation, had successfully liberated the Demon Lord's Domain in the previous year, they looked forward to seeing what wonders this new year would bring.

"Can anyone halt our emperor's march? Can any foe stop our emperor?" These song lyrics rang in the air as the people drank and partied.

There was a luxurious feast at Haan Castle too. Fuuga, who had complained about difficulty eating and drinking while on the throne, sat on a wide fancy carpet with Mutsumi and his retainers. He was at the head of the group, with the famous generals of the Great Tiger Empire sitting in lines on either side of him. The dignified scene looked like something out of a mandala, but not everyone was present.

"Oh, I don't see young Kasen," said Gaten, the most stylish man in the Great Tiger Empire and the Flag of the Tiger. Because Gaten was always teasing the youngest general, Kasen, the Crossbow of the Tiger, he was the first to note his absence.

Fuuga's right-hand man, Shuukin, the Sword of the Tiger, smiled wryly and informed him, "Kasen is working with Madam Lumiere. He said, 'If Madam Lumiere is working through New Year's, then as her assistant, I can't rest when she isn't.'"

There was no time for the bureaucrats to rest on New Year's. They were fighting as hard as they could to maintain their expanded lands, as the bureaucrats in Parnam had been a year after Souma was summoned. Hashim was also not attending the feast as he was busy hatching his next scheme.

"Hard work, isn't it?" Gaten grunted with a shrug. "The strategies of Sir Hashim and the policies of Madam Lumiere are what's supporting everything now. I bow my head to them. Especially Madam Lumiere, who is laying strong groundwork for us despite being a newcomer, and Kasen, who helps the genius with her work."

“Yeah. They’re going to be indispensable to the Great Tiger Empire from here on,” Shuukin asserted. “Capable warriors can be replaced. They’re likely more important than we are.”

“Hmm. If it comes to it, I’ll have to defend them with my life.” As he imagined himself dying for Kasen, Gaten chuckled. “I guess that’s not a bad way to go.”

It went against his sense of dandyism to risk his life for another man, but seeing the shocked look on Kasen’s face as the life drained away from him wasn’t a terrible proposition.

“Hey! Lord Shuukin! This dish is delicious too!” a young girl interjected, poking her head out from Shuukin’s shadow. It was Elulu, daughter of Garula Garlan, from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan.

Looking at the flawless smile on her face as she heaped a bunch of food on her plate, Shuukin was both charmed and disappointed by how incredibly laid-back she was. Elulu didn’t seem intimidated, even while sitting among the filthy men who made up Fuuga’s retainers.

“You have delicacies from all over, right? That’s the Great Tiger Empire for you. Food as diverse as your lands are vast. And it’s all delicious.”

“Elulu...maybe settle down a little?” Shuukin said with a sigh. “I only let you come along because you wouldn’t hear otherwise, so try to behave a little, please.”

“Okaaay.”

It was hard to tell if she got the message or not from her response.

Thanks to Elulu’s attachment to Shuukin as well as her connections with the independent government of the Father Island of the Spirit Kingdom, she had been given control of the northwest of the Great Tiger Empire. It wasn’t just that the Father Island was effectively under her control; she also traded with the Mother Island, which was heading down the path towards liberalization.

The way she ruled might appear feeble to Fuuga or Hashim, but as an island nation, if the two islands of the Spirit Kingdom were to join the Maritime Alliance, it would put the Great Tiger Empire’s entire coastline under their control. It would be the same if the Great Tiger Empire attempted to suppress

them by force. Without the ability to control the seas, should the Maritime Alliance cut off their access to the sea, the Haan landing party would be easy to starve.

If that were to happen, then using Elulu's friendship with Shuukin to keep them close would be the better choice. This way, the islands would be preserved as an independent country which Souma couldn't easily lay a hand on. Essentially, the closeness between Shuukin and Elulu was the best thing either nation could ask for.

Because of their relationship, Shuukin had told Elulu he would be going to Haan Castle for New Year's, but she had stubbornly insisted on going too.

"I want to see more of the world. Our country became isolationist because of the differences and competition between the different races, but times have changed."

Souma of the Kingdom of Friedonia believed in meritocracy and hired people without regard to race or nationality, so the other nations of the Maritime Alliance were influenced to do the same. Old hostilities between different races had died down as a result. This sentiment was shared in the Great Tiger Empire, which was held together by Fuuga's overwhelming charisma. There might be clashes between nations or ideologies, but interracial strife had essentially vanished.

"During the Magic Bug Disease Incident, my home country finally realized they couldn't keep shutting themselves away. I want to see more of the world. I believe that will be best for the high elf people."

Elulu spoke seriously about her country, impressing Shuukin and Gaten with her thoughtfulness. Despite all evidence to the contrary, she was still a princess.

"Besides, there's all this tasty food out in the wide, wide world. I'd be missing out if I didn't know," she said, tossing a fruit into her mouth, stem and all.

"You just ruined it, Elulu."

Shuukin clutched his head over how little Elulu had changed, while Gaten laughed at how the famous Sword of the Tiger was being run around at her mercy.

While other people celebrated the new year, Lumiere, who'd become the top bureaucrat in the Great Tiger Empire, was dealing with a murderously heavy workload alongside her bureaucrats.

They'd arranged for people to be positioned throughout the new lands that had once been the Demon Lord's Domain. They were aiming to connect the lands with roads for the shipping of supplies. These roads would also be used to travel between them to eliminate any monsters and secure the land's safety.

She was putting everything she'd learned while serving under Maria in the Gran Chaos Empire to good use. Maria had been partially influenced by the way Souma ruled, so it was fair to say that Lumiere was able to rule in a way that was a hybrid of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Gran Chaos Empire.

Lord Fuuga is considering a conflict with the Maritime Alliance. If I don't solidify the country at least somewhat before he moves...then there won't be any point in my being here.

Lumiere had abandoned Maria to join Fuuga because she rejected Maria's stance that it would take a long time to change the world peacefully. Instead, she felt that if there was a way to solve a problem, it should be done immediately, even if it was a violent solution. As a result, the threat that the Demon Lord's Domain had posed to mankind had been resolved. However, Lumiere also understood that because Fuuga had solved the issue so quickly, he couldn't stop here. The speed with which the country had been built made it brittle. They always needed an enemy to unite them; otherwise, they'd be at risk of falling apart in no time.

I'm sure Lady Maria would've hated this... If we had the means to stop once the problem was resolved, we wouldn't have started to begin with, even if we had the power to deal with the problem itself.

It wasn't as if Lumiere hadn't understood Maria's ideals before; Lumiere had just been frustrated with her passivity. Now in her current position, Lumiere felt she could align herself a little more with Maria's way of thinking. Although, given her fondness for reckless haste, that might not have changed the result.

It's too late for that... I chose this path for myself, so I have to follow it.

Changing gears, Lumiere looked down at the document in front of her. Suddenly, the door to the finance ministry burst open, and Kasen, the Crossbow of the Tiger, came in pushing a cart. It was loaded with almost nothing but stacks of paper.

“Madam Lumiere. I’ve collected the paperwork from all the relevant departments.” Kasen sighed as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Though she looked at this new pile of work with a face of anguish, Lumiere quickly regained her composure and smiled. “Thank you for taking the trouble, Kasen.”

“No, this was no big deal,” Kasen replied as he carried the stacks of paper to Lumiere’s desk.

She let out a bitter laugh as she accepted the paperwork. “It’s a great help having you around, but aren’t the generals gathered to celebrate a New Year’s feast right now? Why don’t you join them?”

“No, I couldn’t possibly.” Kasen shook his head. “It wouldn’t sit right with me leaving you all to do the work while I enjoy a banquet. Let me help too.”

“Oh...I see.”

“Yes. And, hey, look...”

Kasen left the room for a moment, returning with a service cart that had been sitting outside the door. The upper and lower levels of the cart were laden with sumptuous dishes. Lumiere’s eyes widened as Kasen flashed her the mischievous grin of a kid who’d just pulled off a prank.

“While I was picking up the paperwork, I raided the kitchens. Let’s snack on this and redouble our efforts.”

“Hee hee. Let’s.” She smiled softly.

As she felt defanged by Kasen’s behavior, Lumiere’s furrows melted out of her brow.

Yet elsewhere, also around the same time...

Having forsaken the year-end feast to scheme in his own room, Hashim was

receiving a report from the intelligence team that served under him.

Without so much as looking at the man, Hashim asked, “How are things proceeding?”

The intelligence operative bowed his head and began his report. “Shaping of domestic opinion is proceeding apace. The voices of those who wish to see Fuuga conquer the entire continent grow by the day.”

“Splendid.”

“However...the results of our operations inside the Kingdom of Friedonia have been less favorable. The intelligence operatives in the service of King Souma are all rather skilled and deeply loyal to the royal family. There are no cracks to work our way into. We suspect that infiltrating them like we did the Gran Chaos Empire will prove impossible.”

“Hmm... That’s unexpected.”

Hashim recalled Souma’s face. It was plain, lacking the majesty of Fuuga’s or the charm of Maria’s, so he was surprised to learn that Souma had such capable agents. Hashim had been aware of the existence of the Friedonian intelligence service, of course, but never thought they could completely shut down one of his operations. The existence of covert operatives suggested a darker side to Souma. Anyone who maintained such a powerful intelligence service had a certain amount of darkness around them.

“I suppose you can’t judge a book by its cover...” he murmured.

“Huh...?”

“No, it’s fine. Avoid pushing too far into Friedonia; focus instead on reforming public opinion inside our country.”

“Yes, sir!”

Once he had given his subordinate his orders, Hashim revised his understanding of Souma.



Chapter 3: The Paths of Brother and Sister

— End of the 1st Month, 1554th year — Night — Parnam Castle —

It was around the time the celebratory mood of New Year's had started settling down. While I was working overtime in the governmental affairs office like every other day, I felt a shadow creep up behind me.

Aisha, who was sitting on the couch with her mouth hanging half open in a somewhat disappointing way, suddenly jumped to her feet and put her hand on the hilt of her sword.

Should I praise her for being able to guard me properly while asleep on the job? Or complain that she shouldn't fall asleep in the first place? I thought.

She cast a sharp glance behind me and challenged the intruder, saying, "Who goes there?"

"It is I, my lord," came the voice of Kagetora, leader of the Black Cats, from behind me.

Given that it was someone who had been able to slip through the defense network inside Parnam Castle and get this close before Aisha noticed him, there probably wasn't anyone else it could have been. And this was why I remained calm even when Aisha jumped to her feet.

"You've got something to report, huh? Aisha. Could you stand by the door and keep people away?"

"Yes, sire! Understood."

Kagetora's subordinates, the Black Cats, would also be keeping watch, so I was just being extra cautious. Once we were ready, I looked at him.

"Go on?"

"Yes, sir. The agents of the Great Tiger Empire, who were actively sniffing around inside our nation last year, have downsized the scale of their operations

since the start of this year. We believe they have given up on maneuvering inside our country.”

“Well, we have been thoroughly crushing any seeds of unrest they could have fomented, after all.”

Obviously, there was no way to rule without causing discontent among the people. However, even if people were dissatisfied, we could keep it at a level where they wouldn’t want to take up arms to remedy the situation. Hashim probably wanted to incite a rebellion of the people against the state, but the rebels would be risking their own lives.

Unless they suffered under harsh rule and were in such a desperate situation that it was do or die for them, they wouldn’t rise up so easily. Even if there were prospective rebels among the people, their friends and acquaintances who didn’t want to be held responsible for their actions could be expected to turn them in before anything came of it.

In the nineteenth chapter of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, “That One Should Avoid Being Despised and Hated,” he says that “those who conspire against a prince always expect to please the people by his removal; but when the conspirator can only look forward to offending them, he will not have the courage to take such a course,” and also that “he who conspires cannot act alone, nor can he take a companion except from those whom he believes to be malcontents.”

Ultimately, ruling in a way that makes it hard for the people to get upset will save a king. I had my new wife, Maria, flying all over doing her philanthropic work, absorbing the troubles of the powerless and reporting them back to us to be remedied. These sorts of small things had culminated to deal a painful blow to Hashim’s scheming.

I crossed my arms and looked up at the ceiling.

“If I were to think of anyone else he could agitate in this kingdom, it would be those who might want the throne for themselves or those who are against the current trend towards meritocracy. But the Royal House of Elfrieden was largely wiped out in Elisha’s time, and as for the Princely House of Amidonia, Roroa and Julius are both trustworthy allies.”

“There are no royals who could rebel against you.”

“Yeah. As for the corrupt nobles who might be counted on to rebel at a time like this, I purged them all a year after receiving the throne... If I consider that as preparation for *now*, I guess it was worth getting their blood on my hands.”

I looked down at my own hands. I couldn't believe I'd truly made the right decision back then, but now I felt it was a good decision. When I thought about how those guys could have still been hanging around at this point...it gave me the shudders. Well, that was only something I could say in hindsight.

After a long pause, Kagetora nodded and said, “I suppose.”

We shared a quiet moment of sadness together.

Then, as if to dispel that emotion, I shook my head.

“Well, if there's less pressure on us, then that's for the best. We just have to prepare for the coming war, so we're ready for anything. And maybe...we might even need to borrow a helping hand from ‘the dead,’ you know?” I joked while sending a meaningful look in Kagetora's direction.

Kagetora, however, didn't stir in the slightest. “There is no need for concern, my lord. The strength of the young ones in this country grows by the day. There will be no need to cling to such absurd nonsense as the dead being returned to life.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Hearing Kagetora's weighty voice say that there was no need for concern, I couldn't help but feel everything really was okay...

“Your Majesty! Someone is coming,” Aisha suddenly called from where she stood in front of the door.

Before I could signal to Kagetora with my eyes, he had already vanished. *He's really polished his whole ninja act.*

After some time, there was a hesitant knock at the office door.

“Come in,” I called, and Yuriga entered. She looked at me and Aisha as though she were about to say something but was hesitant to.

“What's up, Yuriga?”

She seemed to find her resolve and looked up.

“S-Souma! I want you to let me go home!”





The story turns back roughly two months, towards the end of the previous year...

In the changing room at the multipurpose Parnam Stadium that had been constructed, Yuriga was hanging her head while still in her mage soccer uniform. Until a little while ago, her team, the Parnam Black Dragons, had been in a showdown with the Lagoon City Doldons to decide the top spot in this mage soccer season. It was an important match that decided the overall winner.

Urgh. We lost... And we almost had it too...

The two teams had fought for points, and it wasn't even settled after overtime, so the heated match had gone to a penalty shoot-out which had regrettably ended with the Parnam Black Dragons letting victory slip away from them.

Suddenly, someone threw a towel over Yuriga's head.

"Good work, Queen."

Brushing the towel aside, Yuriga shot a cold glance at the speaker. "Could you not call me that, Captain?"

"Oh, my. You don't like it?"

The captain of her team, who had also been Yuriga's senior during her time at the Royal Academy, was a female dragonewt. She sat down next to Yuriga, seemingly unconcerned.

"Whew, we got real close there, huh? Almost had it."

"You're not frustrated, Captain?"

"Course I am. I'd locked myself in a bathroom stall until a little while ago."

The captain was known for making such jokes, so for a moment, Yuriga thought that was all it was, but on closer inspection, her captain's smiling face had faint traces of tears in the corners of her eyes. They were both equally frustrated, but as the team leader, she was doing her best not to let it show.

Yuriga clenched her fists. "Our team is good enough. We could have won...so I

can't help but think of things I should've done differently."

"Yeah, I know. And we got led on a merry chase by the Doldons' unorthodox strategy in this game too. I heard rumors that Duchess Excel was giving advice at their strategy meeting for fun."

"Urgh! That old— Mmmph!"

The captain hurriedly covered Yuriga's mouth to stop the insult that almost slipped out of it.

"Whoa! You can't say that!"

There were some unwise things to say about Excel, and rumor went that if you uttered any of them, she'd suddenly appear behind you. Incidentally, this rumor had originated from a base of the former navy because it had been easy for her to overhear there, but it seemed the stories had taken on a life of their own.

The captain removed her hand from Yuriga's mouth and shot her a grin. "Well, we'll just have to try harder next time. Let's lift up the victor's cup together next year!"

"Next year... Sure."

Yuriga's expression darkened at the words "next year." That would be when her brother, Fuuga Haan, would attack this country. That's what her husband, Souma, and the elites of this country thought and were preparing for.

Would there even *be* mage soccer matches next year? What would the people think of her, Fuuga Haan's little sister, being on the team? It was depressing to consider. However, at the same time, she wanted to protect her life in this country. For that reason, Yuriga knew there were things only she could do. She understood Souma's current policy. With that in mind, Yuriga thought of a decisive move she could make.

*In order to reach a bright future...I'll go back to my brother's place!
Temporarily!*

Yuriga decided to resolve herself to a *temporary* return home to the Great Tiger Empire.



“I want you to let me go home!”

Both Aisha and I doubted our ears when we heard her sudden request.

Even when she fought with Liscia or one of the others and things got touchy, someone always stepped in to mediate the situation. We could generally count on Juna to smooth things over, and on the rare occasions when Juna got angry, everyone realized the family was in crisis and worked to put her in a good mood. The family maintained harmony that way, so we’d never heard talk like this before. Although that was partially because Parnam Castle was Liscia’s home.

As I was in a daze thinking, *That line sure does some damage hearing it from someone close to you...* Aisha snapped back to her senses first and closed in on Yuriga, then seized her by the shoulders.

“Y-You shouldn’t make a hasty decision, Yuriga! A royal divorce is no small matter! If there’s something wrong with His Majesty, I’ll make him fix it, so please reconsider!”

We’re assuming I did something?! Oh...no, maybe I did? While I contemplated my past actions, Aisha shook Yuriga by the shoulders.

“Please reconsider, Yuriga!”

Yuriga blinked rapidly as her head shook back and forth. “Huh? Divorce? What are you talking about, Aisha?”

Judging by the blank look on her face, it seemed there was a misunderstanding. We breathed deeply to calm ourselves, and Yuriga loudly cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry... In my haste, I didn’t explain myself well enough. When I say I want to return home, it’s not because I want a divorce. I mean that I want to go back to the Great Tiger Empire temporarily in order to meet with my brother. I was hoping to get your permission for that today.”

“A temporary return home...? At a time like this?”

I felt my own brow furrow. Everyone in my family and the upper echelons of

this country shared an understanding that Fuuga would be attacking us sometime this year. Yuriga's decision must have been made with that in mind too. Her resolve was firm; she wasn't shaken at all, seeing the harsh look on my face.

"It's *because* it's a time like this that I've decided there are things only I can do."

"Okay... Let's hear what you have to say."

"Huh? You're okay with it?" Aisha asked.

I nodded. "You've got some idea in mind, right? Let's hear what that is first."

"Thank you." Yuriga bowed her head slightly. Then, raising her face again, she looked me in the eyes. "I've thought this through a lot on my own. If fighting my brother is unavoidable, maybe we can keep it short? If the war drags on, both sides will only suffer more casualties and exhaust themselves. When I considered if there was anything I could do to avoid a protracted conflict, a thought dawned on me."

"And that is...?" I asked.

"Putting a time limit on my brother's ambitions." Yuriga nodded. "If there's a time limit, like in a mage soccer match, we can lower the damage to this country."

"Hmm, I get it, but not entirely... Are you talking about a winter truce or something along those lines?"

"No, I'm not thinking of something where he'll attack again once it warms up next year. If he's going to attack this year, I want to put my brother into a situation where if he doesn't win, he'll never have another chance."

That makes sense. And you could call it putting a time limit on his ambitions...

"If you were talking about dealing a crippling blow he can't recover from in the first battle, then I get it. That's what we're aiming to do, after all. But judging from how you're talking, that's not your aim, right?"

"Right. For argument's sake, even if my brother doesn't attack this year, my idea will put him in a situation in which, from next year onward, he won't be

able to dream of conquering the continent anymore. I want to end his ambitions this year, whether the war comes or not.”

“Is that possible?”

“I can’t say for certain, of course. But I think it’ll be effective enough to be worth trying. And it’s something that only I, as his little sister, can do.”

And so, Yuriga revealed her plan to me...

When she first started, I was very apprehensive that it would work. But as I listened, I soon thought it might be a good move. I was particularly impressed by the fact that this plan was based on something Yuriga had learned in the Seadian city of Haalga. Even if her efforts ended in vain, they’d surely pound another narrow wedge into Fuuga’s ambitions.

“Hrmm... I think it’d be effective.” I said, crossing my arms. “But...I want to get Hakuya’s opinion too.”

“Oh! I’ve already consulted Mr. Hakuya. He placed a number of conditions on it but agreed it was worth trying. He said you should make the final decision.”

She’s already gotten him to sign off on it, huh? She didn’t study alongside Tomoe and Ichiha for nothing. I should’ve expected this kind of sharp footwork from her.

“Okay, what were the conditions?”

“To make sure I can definitely return to this country and that the key to this plan was being able to meet with my brother and talk, so not to get hung up on having the meeting be at Haan Castle.”

“Yeah. Well, that would be the thing to worry about.”

If Yuriga, who had come to our country as a bride, was to casually go to Haan Castle, she’d be the perfect excuse to make accusations against us. Disputes between royals had been used as justification for conflicts since at least as far back as the Trojan War. They could spread rumors that Yuriga ran away because I was rough with her, or something like that. Even if Yuriga herself said otherwise, the truth could be crushed, and Yuriga wouldn’t be allowed to return here.

“How do you feel about this, Yuriga?”

“I’m aware that my return could reflect negatively on us. That’s why, although I’ll be going back to my home country, I’d like to arrange a meeting with my brother somewhere near the border.”

“Hmm? You’re going to bring Fuuga all the way to *our* border?” I doubted he would bother coming to a country he planned to attack. “I can’t see him agreeing to that...”

“You’re right. Which is why I plan to meet near a different border.” Yuriga pointed to the world map sitting on the table, specifically the northernmost point on the continent of Landia.

“Oh! Near Haalga, huh?”

“Yes. At the moment, it’s effectively under the joint supervision of the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire. I’m thinking of calling my brother to meet me here in this desert region. Being near Haalga is convenient for my plan too, after all.”

“You may be right, but that’s pretty far away. How would you account for the condition of your return to this country?”

“The Demon Lord...no, Madam Mao can use magic to transport people, like Mother Dragon, right? Should she be willing to help, my safety is guaranteed.”

The plan even factors in Mao’s overpowered abilities, huh?

Yuriga had a slightly worried look on her face. “But...that’s assuming that Madam Mao is willing to help. She’s neutral, so if she refuses to assist, then I’ll have no choice but to give up on the plan.”

Yeah... If Yuriga’s safety isn’t assured, I can’t give her permission, I thought, then replied, “Well...we can ask, at least.”

“Huh?” Yuriga stared at me blankly, and I turned to Aisha.

“Aisha, could you open the kamidana for me?”

“Yes, sire. Understood.”

Aisha stretched to reach the Japanese-style kamidana that I’d installed at a

high point in the governmental affairs office and opened the doors to the little shrine within. I'd made it myself with my amateur carpentry skills. And inside was the red magatama I'd received from Mao that day.

While she was doing that, I activated a simple receiver. Yuriga looked on, clueless as to what was happening.

I stood before the kamidana and clapped my hands together while facing the magatama.

"Mao. If you can hear me, could I ask you to show yourself?"

"You called, Lord Souma?"

Hearing an immediate response, I turned to the simple receiver where the image of DIVAlloid MAO was projected.



This magatama was something that Mao had given to me in place of a mortuary tablet because I'd been separated from my original world without being able to bring anything to remember my family by. She'd said it contained my biological data, but it had some minor functionality beyond just data storage—it was also a means of contacting Mao.

Mao was an artificial intelligence. If I activated her, she could respond instantly. She had no need for private time or sleep, so she could join in on broadcast meetings with the leaders of other countries without any need to adjust schedules. She lacked a physical body too, but as long as I had the magatama and something for her to project herself onto, we could talk anytime.

This function was added at Mao's request in case there was another bug on her end that needed my (or my bloodline's) authorization to fix it. Because Mao was an AI with no corporeal form, you could say that by calling her to this room, she was actually "here."

I turned to Mao, who had a look of blank confusion on her face at my sudden call. "Mao. I want you to decide if something is possible or not."

"Hmm? What would that be?"

I told Mao about Yuriga's plan. "And there you have it... So, do you think you can help us?"

"Sure, I can."

With the situation explained, Mao was quick to agree. It was so easy that Yuriga and I just sort of looked at one another in shock.

"Are you sure? You don't intervene in this world's conflicts, right? Though, in this case, I'm not certain it counts as intervening."

"That's correct. Tiamat and I aren't given the authority to take part in wars between the new races of mankind... Not even if they put your life at risk, Lord Souma. If that is the choice of the new mankind, then we are programmed to be unable to intervene. I cannot send reinforcements to help in a war between the new races of mankind either, nor can I transport supplies or people involved in such a war."

Mao was apologetic, but soon raised her head once more.

“However, what you have requested of me does not conflict with that. War will not have broken out yet at the time; all I will be doing is guaranteeing the safety of Yuriga and providing a place for the meeting. Her plan would not directly affect the war, right?”

“Yeah. That’s right,” Yuriga answered with a firm nod. “What I want to do likely won’t have any influence on the war that might happen between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Kingdom. Before my brother does *anything*, I want to go home briefly and have a talk with him. Simply put, that’s all it is. And you would only provide a place where we can talk, brother and sister, without anyone interfering.”

“And you’re not lying?” Mao prodded.

“I swear it on my name as a Haan,” Yuriga asserted.

Nodding, Mao replied, “Then there’s no problem. Would you like me to transport you to Haalga right now?”

Oh, she can do it already? Man, just like with Madam Tiamat, beings that can use transportation magic exist on a totally different level.

Yuriga shook her head at the offer. “No, I still have to prepare. I’ll come to you when that’s finished.”

“Oh, I see... Well, once the war starts—or if it’s about to—it’s possible I won’t be able to help you anymore, so please understand.”

“I know. I’ll definitely be ready before then.”

“Understood. I’ll be going, then.” With that, the receiver stopped, and Mao’s image vanished.

There wasn’t any response from the magatama, so I asked Aisha to close the kamidana’s doors. Squaring that all away, I then turned to Yuriga.

“Okay, assuming we have Mao’s assistance, what of the other preparations you mentioned?”

“Oh! There’s something that I want you to get ready for me when I meet with my brother.”

“What’s that?”

Yuriga asked me to lend her *something*. My eyes widened at what it was.

“You want *that*?! Uh, isn’t bringing it with you going to be a tremendous amount of effort?”

“It doesn’t have to be all of it, of course. If I can borrow just a little and show it to my brother, I think that’ll help with convincing him of what I’ll be saying.”

Oh, just some of it will do? In that case, yeah, it’s possible. I sighed. “But it’s not in our country now. I’ll have to get permission from Shabon.”

“Well...use the power of the Maritime Alliance, or whatever.”

“You make it sound so easy... Oh, fine.” I scratched my head as I nodded. If I explained and then gave it back afterwards, Shabon would probably approve.

I looked at Yuriga again. There was a look of hope in her eyes, as if she were clinging to me. But at the same time, I also sensed a determination to follow through on her convictions.

“I think this plan of yours is interesting, Yuriga. I’m sure it’ll fluster Fuuga and potentially put a time limit on his ambitions...but you can’t expect much more than that. Like, say, Fuuga casting aside his goal of uniting the continent.”

Yuriga reacted with stunned silence.

Yeah... I figured that was it.

There was no lie in what Yuriga had told us. But I felt like her slight hopes were behind her plan. The thought that maybe, possibly, she could stop the impending invasion. Even if the chance was so faint that it was nearly impossible, she couldn’t help but chase after it.

“There probably isn’t even a one in a million chance that Fuuga will change how he lives.”

“...”

“But you want to do it anyway, right?”

“...Yes.” Yuriga nodded firmly. “I also doubt my brother’s going to suddenly change how he lives his life at this point. But...I want to show him that there’s

another way. That there's a future in which things aren't settled by fighting. Even if it's something I'm sure he'll never choose, I want him to see it. And if there's even a one in a million—no, a one in a billion chance that he might choose a different path, I want to show it to him. That's how I feel!"

She was fighting back tears. Her words were powerful. I could feel Yuriga's determination seeping into them.

"I think those hopes will betray you."

"Even so!"

"I see..."

If she was this determined, there was nothing more for me to say.

I took a deep breath, then, in the gentlest tone I could manage, I said, "Give it a shot and see what happens. Do what you believe is best."

"Oh! Thank you!" Yuriga's words were tinted with glee.

I looked at her with a serious expression and said, "But please, promise me just one thing."

"What's that...?"

"Even if things don't play out how you want them to, you must come back here. You're part of the family now, and this is your home. Promise me that, at the very least."

"That's right! You can't just *not* come home!" Aisha backed me up.

Of course, I planned to ask Mao to transport her home, whether she liked it or not, once she was done. There wasn't any point in extracting a verbal promise, but I wanted to communicate our feelings to her properly.

After giving me a blank look for a second, Yuriga answered, "Yes!" Smiling with tears in the corners of her eyes, she added, "And if it doesn't work, let me cry on your chest."



About a month passed...

Yuriga and Fuuga stood facing one another in front of the gates of Haalga, the

Seadian city on the northern edge of the continent. Fuuga only had Mutsumi with him, but his forces were standing in a location a short distance away. Yuriga, on the other hand, had Kagetora behind her.

In order to show this meeting was of Yuriga's accord, Souma had the rest of the Black Cats guard her from the shadows. By only having Kagetora present, it conveyed that she had other unseen guards as a way of keeping the other side in check.

"I didn't expect *you* to call me out here."

"It's been a while since we've seen you, Yuriga."

Fuuga and Mutsumi bowed their heads to her.

"Yes, it has been a long time, Brother and Big Sister Mutsumi. Thank you for coming all this way."

"Oh, you can drop the formalities," Fuuga said bluntly. "Anyway, you've got something to say to me, don't you?"

"Yes. I need you to hear this, Brother."

Yuriga looked her brother straight in the eyes. His stare could intimidate almost anyone, but not his little sister. Even as Fuuga prepared to gobble up the world, Yuriga could stand before him on her own. And seeing her again, he felt her determination.

"Huh? Right now? While fully aware of the risks that come with you standing before us as Souma's wife?"

Fuuga was testing her, but she was uncowed.

"Yes." She nodded. "Because I think this will be the only time I can talk to you."

"The way you say that...it doesn't sound like you plan on coming home."

"I'm already married to Souma. If I have any home, it's Parnam Castle now."

"Tough talk. You know Hashim wants to take you into custody..."

"Big Brother Hashim would definitely do it too. Is this going to be okay?" Mutsumi asked, concerned.

“It will be just fine,” Yuriga answered with a nod. “I’ve made escape preparations, should they be needed.”

“Heh heh!” Fuuga let out a hearty chuckle. “You sure have gotten strong. Our little Yuriga’s grown up so much.”

The three of them all had relaxed looks on their faces, and if you took away the big man in the eerie black tiger mask, it would have looked like nothing more than siblings having a casual chat.

“And?” Fuuga said, putting a hand on his hip. “What is it you want me to hear?”

“Something that I think you’d want to hear...” Yuriga raised her right hand. As she did, the gates of Haalga opened, and there was a rumble as the sandy ground began to shake.

Eventually, something massive was brought through the gates and carried out behind Yuriga. As Fuuga’s and Mutsumi’s eyes widened, Yuriga stared back at them, her gaze unwavering.

“I wanted to show you this. You ought to know about it because...it was in my reports,” Yuriga said, gesturing to the object behind her. “And what I want to tell you is about the world where this thing was born.”



A few days after heading off on her trip to the north, Yuriga returned to the Kingdom of Friedonia safe and sound. Although adequate measures had been put in place to ensure her safety, it was almost a letdown how easily she returned from her short trip back home. However, I couldn’t be sure that her state of mind was nearly as relaxed.

I heard she would be arriving at Parnam Castle shortly, so I stayed in the governmental affairs office to work while I waited for her. In her current mental state, I felt that greeting her with too much concern or leaving her alone were bad ideas. I’d discussed it with Liscia and Tomoe and decided we should greet her as we normally did.

Although overtime at the office by myself was a regularity for me...I heard a rap at the door.

“Come in,” I said.

“Sorry to bother you,” Yuriga replied, coming in with her eyes lowered.

Once she was inside, Aisha quietly closed the door behind her, leaving just me and Yuriga together.

“Welcome home, Yuriga.”

She bowed her head with her eyes still downturned and said, “I’ve returned.”

Her tone of voice was normal. But I couldn’t see her expression. Worried, I rose from my chair, and she slowly walked towards me.

“I think I was able to drive a wedge into my brother’s heart.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He can no longer run away, although I’m sure he never planned to. But now, he’ll have to stake everything on an all-or-nothing battle, with no second chances.”

“I see.”

“But...”

I approached her, and Yuriga raised her face. Large tears began to roll down her cheeks.

As she wept openly, biting the corners of her lips, Yuriga said, “I couldn’t...get my brother to choose a path other than fighting... I wanted...to stop him...if I could... But no, it was never going to work.”

I put my arms gently around Yuriga’s shoulders and pulled her close. She sobbed loudly into my chest.

“And if it doesn’t work, let me cry on your chest.” Remembering her words, I kept my promise from that day, but it only felt painful. She must have been frustrated. Yuriga wanted Fuuga to stop, despite knowing it wasn’t even remotely possible. She’d still wanted to cling on to some vain hope. And when it predictably didn’t happen, she couldn’t just write it off like it was another calculated plan.

I rubbed her back like you might do to soothe a baby, but...

“Don’t treat me like a child!” Yuriga shouted, shoving me in the chest. “I’m your *wife*! If you’re going to comfort me, do it like a husband should!”

I winced as she glared at me. She had the face of an independent woman. When I first met her, she had looked like a kid in middle school, but she’d long since outgrown that.

“Understood.”

I circled around behind Yuriga and hugged her tight as she continued sobbing. She probably didn’t want me to see her face like this.

We stayed like that for a while, in a room where no one would interrupt.



The story now turns back to just after Fuuga and Yuriga’s meeting...

Having finished their talk, Fuuga and Mutsumi returned to their military camp, where they were met by their advisor, Hashim. While it had been hard to imagine Yuriga would bring any harm to Fuuga, it was clear she leaned towards the Kingdom of Friedonia’s side. As such, the advisor was wary of Souma’s hands pulling her strings.

“Lord Fuuga. What did Lady Yuriga have to say? Was she scheming something?”

“Hmm? It didn’t seem like there was any secret plot or anything,” Fuuga answered as he jumped down from Durga’s back. He helped Mutsumi down from her horse before continuing, “As for what she said...it was just about the world of the Seadians.”

“The world of the Seadians?”

What was life like in the north, where the Seadians were said to have resided, before being transferred to this world? Why would Yuriga go so far out of her way to tell Fuuga about it? Hashim’s mind raced as he explored a number of possibilities, but no clear answer emerged, much to his chagrin.

Fuuga shrugged and said, “Probably no point thinking about it. I doubt an ulterior motive behind what Yuriga had to say.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Yeah. Well...she did serve me a strong dose of ‘poison’ though.”

“What? Poison, you say?” Hashim’s eyes widened at the unsettling word that had suddenly entered the conversation, but Fuuga dismissed it with a laugh.

“Not *real* poison, obviously. What Yuriga brought with her was, well... Let’s call it a toxin of the heart. The info is like a delayed poison that’ll slowly affect my passion. It’s one that would only work on me, and something only she, as my little sister, could craft. Yeesh. Seems like she really took a liking to Souma in the end.”

Hashim furrowed his brow as Fuuga roared with laughter again.

“Toxic *information*? Are you still all right?”

“Nah, it’s had more of an effect than I thought it would.” Fuuga scratched his head as if to say, “Well, what do I do now?” Even the calm and cold-blooded Hashim was perturbed to see Fuuga acting like this.

“I have no idea what could have happened as I was simply watching from a distance, but...does this have something to do with that thing that Yuriga brought out?” Hashim asked.

“Nah, that’s not important. She probably just hauled it out here for explanation’s sake.”

“Just what is going on here...?” Frustrated by Fuuga’s beating around the bush, Hashim looked at Mutsumi.

With a somewhat sad expression, she answered, “I suspect that Yuriga had hoped to prevent Lord Fuuga and Sir Souma from fighting... Even though she also saw an inevitable collision between the Great Tiger Empire and the Kingdom of Friedonia, she likely hoped she could show Lord Fuuga another future. And while he couldn’t follow through with what she wished for...it still clawed deep scars into Lord Fuuga’s heart.”

“Yeah. That sums it up,” Fuuga said with a nod. “I also saw a glimpse of Souma’s thinking through my conversation with Yuriga. It seems he doesn’t plan to fight against us, but against *something even bigger*, and he plans to win.”

“Hmm? What in the world does that mean?”

“Sorry, I don’t think I can put it into words all that well right now, so I’ll explain it to you later. That said, if we don’t do something, I won’t be able to challenge Souma. Then there’s Yuriga’s poison on top of that. It looks like I’ll only get one chance to really take on Souma and his people. If I can’t win decisively, then I’ll never be able to beat them again.”

“So the coming war will decide everything, you say?” Hashim’s expression grew grim.

Fuuga nodded. “Exactly... Though Yuriga’s poison was targeted at me specifically; if someone were to take my place, they could probably have another go at it.”

“Surely you jest. This great nation would be unmanageable were it not for your greatness.”

“Yeah. Which is why the next battle will be the gamble of a generation.” Fuuga grinned with a feral look in his eyes.

The bigger and tougher the enemy, the more alive fighting them made him feel. It was his nature, and it’s what had shaped him into the great man he’d become. For as long as he had this look on his face, Fuuga’s charisma would keep his followers believing that no one could halt his march.

Fuuga punched his fists together to hype himself up. “Okay, time’s a-wasting. Even if we’re not totally ready to go, it’ll be bad news if we let them completely prepare for us. Who’s going to create this world’s future? Me or Souma? Let’s go to his castle in Parnam and find out the answer!”

“Yes!”

“By your will.”

Mutsumi and Hashim saluted Fuuga.

They hurriedly departed for Haan Castle, and Fuuga glanced back towards Haalga, where he’d met his sister.

I’m sorry, Yuriga. I’m gonna walk my own path. And it looks like you’ve chosen your path too. Let’s keep running down our course, so we don’t regret our choices.



Chapter 4: Towards World War

The common threat to mankind in the Demon Lord's Domain was now resolved, and the announcement of no further demon waves spread through the continent. With this, people anticipated the dawn of a new era.

The people of the Kingdom of Friedonia and their allied countries in the Maritime Alliance waited eagerly to see what new wonders would come about in a world devoid of a demon threat. Diversity had increased, which could lead to the discovery of many gifted people and advances in many fields of the arts and sciences. Just how prosperous would they all become?

Meanwhile, the people of the Great Tiger Empire viewed things differently. Their lives had been filled with battles to expand their country and regain stolen lands. As they were an assembly of the deprived, their presence had been made known through cheering and applause. They'd focused on how they were small, weak nations forced to think more about how to appease other countries than how to enrich themselves. And that it was Fuuga who had liberated them from poverty, slavery, and refugee status.

For those who'd been freed from their suffering, the idea that Fuuga might cease to be absolute frightened them. If their savior fell from power, they feared their lives might return to the hard times they'd lived in before. Unlike the nations of the Maritime Alliance, who had their eyes on the future, these people were terrified of returning to the past.

Fear served as a more powerful motivator than hope.

That's why, as far as the people of the Great Tiger Empire were concerned, the leader of the coming era had to be Fuuga, not Souma. They couldn't rest well at night until it was clear which of the two was more fit to carry the next era. Fuuga and Hashim quickly unified public sentiment behind this opinion and created an atmosphere that called for war with the Kingdom of Friedonia.

History showed that with the support of the people, fabricating a *casus belli* was a simple matter. They could invent an attack from the enemy nation that never occurred, claim they were sheltering political opponents, or even accuse the other side of stealing their woman, like in the Trojan War. Whatever the reason, there were ways to twist it into a justification.

They could condemn the Maritime Alliance for trying to get ahead by negotiating with Mao, the ruler of the Seadians, without consulting them; or for giving succor to political enemies, like Sami and Nike Chima, or enemies of the Lunarian Orthodoxy like Souji, Mary, and the former saint candidates.

If they wanted to make an issue of Souma mistreating Yuriga after she married into his house, they could probably do that too. (But given Fuuga's personality, this one was unlikely.) Once traveling merchants and adventurers brought word that public sentiment in the Great Tiger Empire leaned towards war, the people of the Maritime Alliance had to set aside their earlier joy, replacing it with the thought of inevitable conflict.

It wasn't long before the entire continent of Landia was bracing for war.

One day, Fuuga gathered his key subordinates at Haan Castle. They assembled in the grand hall in front of the throne like they had to celebrate the new year, but instead of food, there was a map of the continent in the center.

The commanders could tell they were probably here to hold a war council for a hypothetical conflict against the Maritime Alliance. And, as expected, Hashim, the head of the meeting, indicated the Kingdom of Friedonia with his pointer.

"The battle against the Kingdom of Friedonia must be quick and decisive," Hashim told the distinguished group before him. "Our Great Tiger Empire can mobilize two times as many troops as the Kingdom can, but we'll be at a disadvantage if we face the entirety of the Maritime Alliance at once. Not even the assistance of our allies in the Orthodox Papal State and the high elves of the Father Island would be enough. If all a country has going for it is its many allies, then the established strategy is to defeat them individually. However, the bonds between the Alliance are strong. We must be prepared that moving towards one will require us to face them all."

"Aw, yeah! We're going to war with half the world!" Nata, the battle maniac,

sounded ecstatic, but no one responded to him.

Looking at the map, Shuukin, the Sword of the Tiger, hesitantly said, “The Kingdom of Friedonia is a country so impressive that we saw it worthwhile to wed Lady Yuriga to their king to secure their friendship. It is clear they will be a difficult foe. I know that public sentiment inside our country has grown bellicose, but there’s really no need for us to force a conflict, is there?”

Shuukin understood that Hashim had fomented public sentiment but purposely ignored that fact.

“Lord Fuuga once described King Souma as a massive turtle,” Shuukin continued. “Should we not make a move first, it is doubtful he’ll take the initiative. If the consensus is that they won’t invade us, then aren’t we at leisure to amass our strength?”

“It is as Sir Shuukin says,” agreed Lumiere, the head of the bureaucracy. “This nation is vast and powerful, but it is still young. The people have passion and vigor, but we have not reached our full potential. If I could have only a few more years, I would create a country for you that could overwhelm the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Maritime Alliance. Can I not ask you to wait until then?”

“No, that’s not gonna be possible...” Fuuga, who was sitting on the throne, dismissed their opinions. “It sounds like Souma and his gang are plotting something. If they pull off whatever it is, we’ll stand no chance. Lumiere’s saying she needs a few years, but we don’t have that kind of time...”

“Huh?! What are they plotting?!” Shuukin asked.

Fuuga shook his head. “I’ve got an idea...but I can’t tell you just yet.”

“Why is that?”

“If I say it here, some of you will panic. Just know this. Yuriga’s betting on me losing. That’s enough for us to discern that their plan is fatal to us. We’ve got to prevent it no matter what.”

“Yes. Hence the need to be quick and decisive,” Hashim said, taking over the conversation, pointing at the map. “When we invade the Kingdom of Friedonia, the nations of the Maritime Alliance will coordinate their response. Similar to

when we invaded the Gran Chaos Empire, a counterinvasion will likely attack our territory. In order to prevent that, we should instead send forces to engage each country in order to keep them in check. Our main target will be the Kingdom of Friedonia, and we'll concentrate our war potential there, but we will likely need to go into this prepared to snatch a few cities from each country."

Having said this, Hashim pointed to the Republic of Turgis.

"First, there is the Republic of Turgis. They were quite active during the battle against the Gran Chaos Empire, taking three cities from Mercenary State Zem. They later relinquished one city, but two are still in their possession. You could say they're the most aggressive nation in the Maritime Alliance."

Fuuga smirked at this explanation from Hashim.

"Their current head is Kuu Taisei, yeah? I saw him during the demon wave and at the talks about the magic bug disease. He had this wild energy about him, like I did in my younger days. The guy's got talent and ambition. If he hadn't been born in a backwater like the Republic—maybe somewhere closer to the continent's center instead—he might've been competing with me and Souma. He's like a big fish lurking under the ice of a frozen lake."

"Yes. The man is not to be underestimated." Hashim nodded, then looked at Moumei, the Hammer of the Tiger. "Sir Moumei. You will lead the soldiers of the former Zem, who submitted to us, in an attack on the Republic, retaking the two lost cities while keeping them in check. Even those who resent our annexation of Zem will have a strong will to fight after what the Republic did to them."

"Understood," Moumei answered briefly, his arms crossed.

Despite looking like a barbarian with the giant hammer he wielded, Moumei was also intelligent and had been appointed viceroy of Zem.

He stared back at Hashim without any sign of agitation. "The soldiers of Zem have told me that the invaders from the Republic were in high spirits. This was likely the effect of Kuu Taisei's personality, and I have every reason to believe he will prove a formidable opponent. If we are, nonetheless, able to retake two cities, what would be our next move after that?"

“The Republic’s lands are hardly worth expending resources to claim. Once the two cities have been taken, harden your defenses and maintain the appearance that you are prepared to invade the Republic at a moment’s notice. I am sure you understand this, Sir Moumei, but when taking the two cities, you are not to press the attack to the point that you incur losses compromising your ability to keep the Republic in check.”

“Duly noted.” Moumei crossed his arms and nodded once more.

Next, Hashim pointed to the Euphoria Kingdom on the map, then looked at Fuuga’s closest friend and confidante, Shuukin.

“Sir Shuukin will take a force consisting of those who joined us from the former Empire and the high elf volunteer soldiers from the Father Island to keep the Euphoria Kingdom in check.”

“What?! You’re keeping me away from the important battles again?!” Shuukin’s eyes were full of anger.

During the Magic Bug Disease Incident, Shuukin had incurred a debt of gratitude to the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Gran Chaos Empire, so he had been assigned to defend the rear supply lines in the previous battle against them. However, this coming war was one in which Fuuga and the nation’s fates hung in the balance. Forbearing though he was, not even Shuukin could accept being excluded from something so important.

However, Hashim didn’t so much as bat an eye as he told him, “I’m asking you because you’re the only one suitable for the task. While I said it was to keep them in check, in order to make the Kingdom of Friedonia focus on the Euphoria Kingdom front, we will need you to make it look like your attack is our main thrust. Even if they know our end goal is strictly Parnam, should we attack the recently formed Euphoria Kingdom...they’ll have no choice but to take some action. In addition, you are close to Princess Elulu, representative of the Father Island, so you’ll be able to put the volunteers they send to reinforce us to good use. Is there anyone who could do this better than you can?”

“You have a point...”

Hashim’s reasoning was sound. The wise and brave Shuukin had to recognize that, at least in his head. But his heart was another matter. As the foremost

commander of the Great Tiger Empire, he felt a desire to take on the decisive battle at Fuuga's side.

At this point, Fuuga, who had been listening to them, chimed in. "I once described the former empress, Maria, as a firebird. She drew the people to her with her radiance, but the light she emitted came from burning herself, and she'd eventually burn out...or so I thought."

"What do you mean, Lord Fuuga?" Shuukin asked.

"A new bird named Jeanne was born from her ashes. She's still just a chick for now, but in time, she'll shine with the same radiance. It seems the House of Euphoria goes through cycles of death and rebirth. Jeanne is not someone we can afford to underestimate. Especially not with the Black-Robed Prime Minister as her royal consort."

After saying this, Fuuga looked straight at Shuukin.

"They're opponents we might struggle against even with me in command. Who else could I rely on to face them but you? Do it for me...my friend."

"Fuuga...my lord. I understand." With all this being said, Shuukin couldn't possibly turn him down. Not as his closest ally, and not as a friend who grew up with him on the steppes.

With that discussion settled, Hashim pointed to the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State and looked at Anne, the Saint of the Tiger.

"Madam Anne and the Lunarian Orthodox faithful will attack the Amidonia Region from the Orthodox Papal State. Ensure they show no fear, even if the 'cold-blooded prince' makes another appearance."

"It shall be as the Holy King Fuuga wills."

Anne nodded with ease. During the prior war against the Gran Chaos Empire, the Orthodox Papal State had fallen into a panic just from Souma's strategist Julius Lastania appearing on the border, which had tripped Fuuga up. It had happened because memories of the oppression they had faced when he had been Julius Amidonia still lingered.

Anne was being asked to take a tight hold of the reins so there wouldn't be a

repeat of that failure. If a saint like her took to the field in battle, their fear of Julius would turn to hatred, and they could take it out on the Kingdom. (Like the Ikko Ikki of the Sengoku period.)

At this point, the young genius Kasen, the Crossbow of the Tiger, raised his hand to speak. “Um... What about the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom? We don’t have a proper navy, so I don’t see any way to keep them in check...”

“Yes. You’re quite right.” Hashim nodded. “Regrettably, I have to conclude we must leave that country alone. We will defend our coastal cities, and if they come ashore, we will retreat inland and have the local garrisons meet them in battle.”

“We’re just going to let them do as they please?”

“Indeed. The war against the Kingdom of Friedonia is an inland struggle. We will transport supplies via the former Empire’s method of overland rhinosaurus shipping, which Madam Lumiere has arranged for us. There will also be air delivery by the air force, so we can maintain even the large armies we will be deploying. The same goes for the Kingdom of Friedonia, of course. So, in this war, sea control is not important.”

The Kingdom of Friedonia was shaped roughly like a right-angle triangle, and the coast was only one side of it. Control of the seas would be useful in an attack against the Great Tiger Empire. However, if the Great Tiger Empire didn’t care how much of a beating their lands took, it would be hard to take advantage of sea control while rushing headlong across the border. Faced with an enemy who employed a strategy of no defense, the Kingdom of Friedonia would open itself up to risks if it chose to divide its forces.

“Lord Fuuga, how do you view Queen Shabon?” Mutsumi asked.

“Hmm.” Fuuga stroked his chin at this question before answering, “I guess...she’s like a jellyfish.”

“A jellyfish? Those things that float in the sea?”

“Yeah. She seems fluffy and insubstantial at first, but those guys can have some dangerous poison in them. She’s hard to grasp, and would be a pain to

take on.”

“I agree. Concerning ourselves with such an opponent would only lead us to fall into her traps,” Hashim concurred.

“So she’s best left alone.” Kasen nodded, seemingly convinced as well.

“Yes. And all that leaves...is for us to batter Friedonia with all our might.” Hashim smacked the Kingdom of Friedonia on the map with his pointer. “Everything will be decided in this war. Who will decide the future of this world? Lord Fuuga or Souma? If we can just take the Kingdom of Friedonia, the Maritime Alliance will fracture. Conversely, if we’re defeated here, we will lose both our chance to ever dominate the continent and the support of those who wish for us to do so. Indeed, this is the decisive battle where we will either take everything or be left with nothing.”

Everyone gulped at Hashim’s words.

Malmkhitan, formerly one of many competing small-to-midsized nations in the Union of Eastern Nations, had gone on to liberate the Demon Lord’s Domain and grown large enough that the entire world seemed within its reach. It was already a great enough accomplishment—a glorious and legendary feat.

Hearing that this war would be all-or-nothing, the commanders tensed. But there was a strange excitement too. People demanded the conclusion to the epic tale of Fuuga. And they felt they were playing a small part in the energy that propelled him forward.

Fuuga let out a low laugh. “Thinking about it now, we sure have come a long way. I ran forth, thinking I’d have no regrets if I fell along the way towards my dreams, and that’s what’s brought me here. All that’s left is to run the rest of the way. If the times demand an answer from me, then I’ll show them one.”

Fuuga rose to his feet, taking Zanganto from his royal guards and thrusting the blade skyward.

“It doesn’t matter what Souma and his gang are plotting! We’ll keep running along like we always have! The trail we leave will be carved into the era’s history! Now, let’s realize our grand ambition at last!”

““““Yeahhhhh!!!””””

The commanders all stood up and cheered. This was the opening to this world's first world war, later known as the North-South War.



The Great Tiger Empire of Haan showed signs that portended a large-scale military operation. They weren't even trying to hide their intention to wage war at this point. The people of the Great Tiger Empire desired a decisive battle for supremacy with the Maritime Alliance. No matter how one felt about it personally, if one's neighbor clamored for war, one would naturally be inclined to do the same. Whether it was due to influence or wanting to avoid ostracization, this mentality swept through the country and became the general consensus. It was simply human nature.

Fuuga began preparing his troops along his border with the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Euphoria Kingdom, which was the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State and the former Zem domain. It looked like he was planning simultaneous invasions from the Great Tiger Empire mainland towards Parnam, from the territory of the former Gran Chaos Empire into the Euphoria Kingdom, from the Orthodox Papal State into our Amidonia Region, and from the former Zem domain into the Republic of Turgis.

The military thinkers on our side, myself included, believed Fuuga would aim for a quick end to the war, sending his main force straight at Parnam. However, if we were at a disadvantage on any of the other fronts, Hashim would loudly crow about my ineffectiveness and the frailty of the Maritime Alliance, which could shake up people on our side. We needed to defend in all directions.

Kuu, the head of the Republic, had told me he had his country covered and to focus on my own, but I still had to place troops in the recently fractured Euphoria Kingdom as well as the Amidonia Region. Queen Shabon of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom promised to send reinforcements, but when it came to battles inland, all the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom could do was raid port cities. If Fuuga's side decided to ignore them outright, then that wouldn't even shake them up.

Of course, I had a variety of moves of my own that I planned to play. Fuuga and I knew that dividing our forces was a bad idea, yet we still had to shore up

these different regions so that we weren't at the enemy's mercy. To paraphrase a certain sci-fi anime, "It was hard for us, but it was also hard for the enemy."

However, unlike in the war with the Principality of Amidonia, we didn't have to hide our preparations this time, which made things a bit easier. Chris Tachyon's news program provided daily, detailed reporting on the movements of the Great Tiger Empire. Thanks to the program, public paranoia was kept to a minimum, and those in villages or towns that were likely to be scorched by the fires of war were convinced to evacuate.

I was grateful I didn't have to resort to having Juno and the adventurers evacuate them at the last minute, using the fictional Flame Pierrot monsters to raze villages as cover. Not that I could have, though, since Juno and her party were out of the country right then on another task for me.

Anyway, all of the different factions were preparing for the war to come.

That brings us to today. I was holding a broadcast call with Fuuga. We already knew what the other wanted to say, so we cut straight to the chase.

"You really can't stop, Fuuga?"

"Yeah." Fuuga looked me in the eyes and nodded.

I ground my teeth in frustration over how completely unwavering he remained. "Yuriga showed you another future! You still can't take it?!"

"I can't. It did touch my heart."

"Then..."

"But the people and the times want an answer—to see the end of my epic tale and the conclusion of this era," he said calmly. "I can't just abandon it halfway through."

Even after his sister had attempted to persuade him not to, he was still going through with it.

"You're not the type to care about other people's opinions, and you know it," I asserted.

"Hah hah hah! True enough. Which is why I want the answer for myself."

Fuuga turned his sharp eyes towards me. “And that’s why I declare war on the Maritime Alliance.”

He delivered his declaration of war so casually. We all knew it was coming, so it didn’t feel like there was any weight to it.

“You realize that not even you can beat us,” I warned him.

“Tough talk. And uncharacteristically warlike for you.”

“I just finished learning that having other people make my decisions for me only results in greater losses. If this war is unavoidable, then I should be proactive and take initiative to limit the casualties.”

Fuuga let out an amused laugh. “So you’ve found your resolve, huh? Looks like I’ve finally gone and stepped on the slow turtle’s tail.”

“Hmm? Slow turtle?”

“I’m just talking to myself, pay it no mind... If that’s the case, there’s nothing more to say.” On the other end of the broadcast, Fuuga held his fist out towards me. “Let’s decide who’ll shape the future! Me or you!”

“I won’t lose! Not a chance!”

Fuuga and I stared each other down. Eventually, he snorted, and the corners of his lips turned up.

“So long, Souma. See you on the battlefield.”

The broadcast cut out, and Fuuga vanished. To the very end, even how he declared war was true to his nature. He didn’t have the sense of guilt that a man on the verge of war ought to have. He carried a darkness within him, but also a brilliant light. That was probably what made him a great man.

“Souma.”

“Souma...”

As I stood there vacantly, Liscia and Yuriga, who had been watching us from a spot where they weren’t visible on the broadcast, approached me.

“Can we take that as a declaration of war?” Liscia asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

It had begun. There was no time for standing around.

I looked at Yuriga. “Are you sure you didn’t want to talk to him?”

“I’ve already realized that nothing I say can stop my brother. Although I did ask you to let me be here so I could see him, to watch as he embarks on what’s bound to be his final war,” Yuriga said, suppressing her complicated feelings in order to remain resolute.

She’d prepared for this in her own way. Like brother, like sister. They were similar, deep down.

“Whew...” I let out a sigh. “Liscia. Yuriga.”

“What?”

“What is it?”

“You know...even at this point, some part of me still thinks Fuuga is cool. He embodies a sort of masculine ideal in the way he stays true to himself.”

Liscia and Yuriga looked at one another, then both smiled.

“Even as a woman, I get it. He’s got that indomitable spirit.”

“I know better than anyone how cool my brother is.”

At this point, Liscia hugged my arm tight. “But you’re the one I feel safest with, Souma. Like I said before Duke Carmine that day, I will walk at your side.”

“Much as it pains me to admit it, I feel the same as Lady Liscia.” Yuriga wrapped herself around my other arm. “I think this country will be the one to carry us into the coming era... That’s why I’m here now. You’re not as cool as my brother, but I’m still proud to call you my darling husband.”

Even Yuriga was saying such bold words now. But the slender arms she’d wrapped around mine were shaking a little. She was probably on edge, yet still trying to support me. In order to respond to the consideration she was showing me, I pretended not to notice and joked around.

“Hey, this is nice and all, but I can’t move with you two hugging me...”

“I bet you’re enjoying yourself, having a beauty on each arm,” Liscia said.

“Well, of course I am.”

“It’s a perk of the position,” Yuriga said. “You’ve got such cute wives, so work hard for us, Souma.”

“Will do.”

Oh, I’ll work hard. For the sake of a future where we can all live together.

And so, just days later, the first shots of a world war were fired.



Chapter 5: Intense in the South, Quiet in the West

The first group to advance was one positioned along the border with the Euphoria Kingdom. It was led by Shuukin and composed of members of the Great Tiger Empire Army and high elf volunteers. However, the core of this attack consisted of commanders and nobles who'd defected from the Gran Chaos Empire to the Great Tiger Empire.

Fuuga was not found on this front, so it was concluded to be a diversion. But since it was the first move of war, the Kingdom of Friedonia sought to defend the Euphoria Kingdom. Failing to do so would risk leaving a negative impression on the people of the Euphoria Kingdom. Losing face here as the head of the Maritime Alliance could very well affect the ability of the two nations to coordinate their actions. In response, Souma immediately broadcast that two island-type carriers were en route to the Euphoria Kingdom.

In the war room at Haan Castle, Hashim listened to reports corroborating that the carriers had indeed left port.

"So, what do you make of it?" Fuuga asked.

"I believe those carriers are empty," Hashim replied, his face calm. "Being able to use the air force at sea is an advantage in sea battles, but it has no effect when the battles are being fought inland. This is a way for them to put up the appearance of supporting the Euphoria Kingdom. It will ultimately have no influence on this war. Their wyvern cavalry was likely left behind in the Kingdom of Friedonia to shore up their defenses."

"So they avoided our diversion, huh? Of course it was never gonna be that easy."

"Naturally. We knew that from the outset. It's why we only sent a token force to face the Euphoria Kingdom in order to keep them in check." Hashim pointed to the south of the continent. "The real collision will happen with the Republic,

I'm sure."



The fighting between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire began on the southern front, in the Republic. Kuu had renamed the two cities he'd snatched from Zem to Tarus and Leporus. (Naming the cities after his darling wives was a very Kuu thing to do.) Leporus stood at the tunnel that connected the area to Sapeur, the capital of the Republic, and Tarus was positioned to back them up.

With Tarus on the front line, only fifty thousand soldiers from the former Zem were attacking the city. Mercenary State Zem originally had a hundred thousand soldiers, but their numbers dwindled during the annexation by the Great Tiger Empire. Even with more men from the Great Tiger Empire's main army reinforcing them, this was all they could field. However, as their strategic objective was only to take two cities, this amount seemed sufficient.

Meanwhile, the Republic had twenty thousand men garrisoned in Tarus and another ten thousand in Leporus. The Republic had around seventy thousand soldiers, but only a portion could be fielded here. Unlike the Great Tiger Empire, who didn't have to watch their backs, the Republic was at risk of the enemy bypassing them and going straight for their homeland, so the rest were kept back. Everything was set up so reinforcements could be sent as necessary, but Kuu was prepared to hold the cities with just these thirty thousand men.

"Aw, yeah. We've got nothing but enemies as far as the eye can see. I haven't seen anything like this since the demon wave."

Kuu looked down at the enemy camp from the high walls of Tarus with a dauntless smile. His second wife, Leporina, and his buddy, Nike, both sighed over their lord's behavior; neither was overly enthused.

"Oh, Master Kuu. How can you sound so carefree? You realize we have to fight all of them, yes?"

"Looks like Big Brother Hashim is ready to take on the world too... Ugh, what a pain."

Leporina was dressed in her archer outfit from when she was Kuu's

bodyguard, while Nike had his favorite spear resting against his shoulder. Despite their grumbling, they'd long since resolved to fight.

Kuu smirked at the sour looks on their faces. "Ookyakya! Don't worry so much. We had Taru give this city a crazy makeover just for this occasion—even calling in a guest from the Euphoria Kingdom to help. You really think a bunch of mooks who aren't even being led by Fuuga Haan will be able to take this place?"

"Surely not!" came an energetic voice.

The three turned to the new arrival. It was Maria and Jeanne's younger sister, Trill, the third daughter of the House of Euphoria. She'd been called in from the Euphoria Kingdom for technical assistance.

"Taru and I have made every effort to make Kuu's absurd idea a reality. This city is a symbol of the changing Republic. No country with rigid and ossified values will be able to take it from us," Trill said, sounding confident.

She was supposed to have gone home before the outbreak of war, but she wanted to see if the systems she'd built functioned as intended. Plus, her own nation might be exposed to the fires of war too, so Jeanne had allowed her to do as she pleased.

Trill's distinctive side-tail hairstyle shook as she cackled. "Hee hee, I'll use my mechanisms to make all of these fellows from the Great Tiger Empire cry for mercy."

Despite her great self-assurance, a messenger raced over to speak to her.

"Lady Trill! As we were testing the mechanisms, there was a malfunction! The technology team is urgently requesting that you come!"

"Heavens have mercy!" Trill shouted. "Excuse me, I have to go!"

She quickly took off, following the messenger. It wasn't a good look for the princess.

"Is she gonna be okay like that...?" Kuu wondered aloud. Leporina gave an exasperated shrug.

"It's because your requests were all so unreasonable, Master Kuu. It would be

cruel to blame Lady Trill.”

“Nah, it’s not like I’m holding it against her... Nike. Sorry, but could you guard Miss Trill for me?”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure thing,” Nike casually accepted, then followed behind Trill, carrying his spear over his shoulder.

Left behind on the wall, Kuu and Leporina looked at the enemy army.

As he cracked his knuckles, Kuu said, “All right, time to make the enemy pay for underestimating the Republic.”

“Yes, I’d say it is.” Leporina nodded in agreement. “I’d like to focus on raising our children, but it’s these people’s fault I’ve had to return to the battlefield instead. That makes me so mad! Let’s work hard for our children, Master Kuu!”

It hadn’t been that long since Taru gave birth to her first child, and Leporina gave birth to her first three. Kuu had intended to leave Leporina behind in the capital too, not just Taru, but Leporina had chosen to fight by his side rather than wait at home. Taru had even told her, “I’ll look after the children. So you look after Master Kuu, Leporina.” The families of both Taru and Leporina were also pitching in to watch over the kids.

Hearing Leporina’s words, Kuu readied his cudgel and put on a dauntless smile.

“Sure thing! All right, kiddos, Daddy and Mommy are gonna show you how strong we are!”

“Yes!”



Meanwhile, in the Great Tiger Empire’s camp, Moumei, the Hammer of the Tiger, was encouraging his soldiers. Moumei was a man of few words, but his deep voice resounded in the bottoms of the men’s stomachs.

“While we fought the Gran Chaos Empire, the Republic came in like burglars and snatched those two cities away from us. O heroes of Zem! The time has come for you to rescue these cities from the hands of those lowly thieves!”

““““Yeahhhh!!!”””” the soldiers cheered. Most were from the former Zem, so

their morale was high when facing the Republic.

There was one voice among them that was louder than all the rest.

“Aww, yeahhhh! It’s finally time to fight!” shouted Nata Chima, the Battle Ax of the Tiger. “Yeesh, I was pissed when they sent me away from the decisive battle against Friedonia, but here I can go wild to my heart’s content! The guys in the Empire were a bunch of sticks in the mud who weren’t worth their bluster. I’ll bet I can find some guys who’ll keep me entertained here!” Nata let out a boisterous laugh.

Fuuga and Hashim were looking to make the war with Friedonia quick and decisive, which required mobility and adherence to orders. The forces of the Great Tiger Empire had always had a high degree of mobility, but they’d lose time if they stopped to fight strong enemies that they didn’t have to or got distracted with looting. If they couldn’t stay focused and bypass stronger cities, they wouldn’t be able to maintain their highest mobility.

There wasn’t much time to bring along every single soldier they came across or gather provisions from one fallen city before moving to the next. Given what they were trying to do, Nata, who just wanted to fight strong guys, would be in the way. If Nata charged the enemy’s defenses where they seemed strongest, then insisted on dragging the whole army with him to break through, that would waste time for no good reason. This was why he’d been sent to the Republic front, where he could go wild to his heart’s content.

Nata’s eyes were sparkling with battle lust. “If I crush these jokers from the Republic fast enough, I’ll be able to join up with the main force! Once the enemy’s been broken, Moumei can defend the place himself, so my bro Hashim can’t really complain!”

The battle maniac’s shortsighted thinking was on full display. Moumei, meanwhile, was keeping a level head, observing the Republic’s forces with all due caution.

I’ve heard that our enemy, Kuu Taisei, looks up to Souma like a big brother. If he’s learned his lessons from Friedonia, then he will not be a simple opponent. I’ll have to wait and see what his first move is.

The former Zem had never been a wealthy country, nor did it have expensive

troops like an air force or those who used gunpowder weaponry. But the Republic didn't have those things either, and their only counter to the Great Tiger Empire's wyvern cavalry was to stay put in their fortresses and use the antiair repeating bolt throwers against them. In short, the air force couldn't be a decisive factor in this war.

This is why outdated weapons can come in handy.

Moumei raised his hammer, then swung it down in the direction of Tarus. "All forces! Rush towards that city! Move forward with the siege weapons! Infantry, defend the rhinosaurs pulling the weapons as you move forward!"

And so the assault on Tarus began.

Rhinosaurs pulled the trebuchets and siege towers from their camp. They'd been brought out by Moumei from the warehouses in Zem City, where they had lain dormant. These were useless on a battlefield dominated by air power, but they still had utility during a battle devoid of an air force.

Moumei watched closely as his anachronistic weapons advanced.

Lord Fuuga is approaching this battle as if it is his last on the path to hegemony... It's as if he is seeking one final glory, like those siege weapons... Quite sensitive despite his rugged exterior, Moumei's thoughts were with his distant lord. *Even if that is the case, we will follow you to the end! My lord, may you accomplish your long-cherished goal!*



"Ookyakya! The enemy's brought out something interesting!" Kuu said with a hearty laugh, sticking his head out from the ramparts.

The siege battle had begun, and the Great Tiger Empire was flinging arrows and magic at them from below.

"Master Kuu! It's dangerous to stick your head out!" Leporina thought he was going to give her a heart attack. "Ah! Now!"

Leporina found a moment to stand up and loose her arrow at the enemies swarming the walls. Her shot flew straight, piercing the throat of a man commanding the soldiers from horseback. The commander fell from his horse

and lay motionless.

Kuu whistled with admiration. “Whew, you’re as good as ever.”

“Of course I am. I couldn’t use my bow while I was pregnant, but I’ve been training ever since I gave birth in order to get back into practice... Oh! But...”

Leporina had been staying alert and watching for the enemy, but now she turned a bright shade of red.

“Hm? Is something up?”

“Well...after giving birth, my figure changed. So, um, my breastplate’s size doesn’t feel quite right...”

“R-Right... That sure sounds tough...”

This was too much information, and Leporina looked cute when she was embarrassed, so Kuu turned red too.

“Whoa! Look out!”

Suddenly, Kuu jumped to shield Leporina with his body as stone tiles fell from the wall. Leporina’s eyes widened as she watched an enemy’s fire magic fly past them.

Once they were both sure of their safety, Kuu let out a sigh of relief.

“That wasn’t a conversation we should be having on the battlefield, huh...?”

“No, it wasn’t...”

“And if we don’t stop that thing, we’re in for some trouble.” As they spoke, a siege tower guarded by soldiers approached. “All right, Leporina! Send Trill the signal!”

“Okay!”

Leporina drew an arrow from the quiver on her back, selecting one with a different arrow head than the others. After nocking it to her bow, she fired it at an even higher angle towards the enemy. The arrow whistled as it fell.

“Here it is...” Trill tensed as she heard Leporina’s signal arrow.

“What direction?” Taru asked.

“The messenger kui just came in! They’re on the north side!”

“That’s where Kuu and Leporina are... We’ll activate the weapons on the north side,” Trill commanded. “Contact those we have standing by. Don’t activate the equipment all at once, but as the situation calls for it, based on directions from the observers.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Watching the messenger run off, Trill prayed for Kuu and Leporina’s safety, then hurried to adjust the mechanism before her.

The siege tower rattled forward. The archers riding on top of the tower fired at the tops of Tarus’s walls to keep them from attacking the soldiers and rhinosaurs pushing the tower below. Kuu, Leporina, and the others protected themselves with shields or hid behind the ramparts. The soldiers at the tower’s base pressed on through intense resistance by the forces of the Republic, fighting their hardest to somehow make it to the wall.

“Listen! There’s no need to stop them from approaching! Lure them in as close as you can!” Kuu ordered.

This ran counter to the expectations of the soldiers on the siege tower. He wasn’t ordering them to keep them away at all costs, but to bring them closer. As a result, there were only sporadic attacks on the siege tower, which made rapid progress towards the walls. Eventually, they got so close that the defenders on the walls and the archers on the tower could see each other’s faces clearly.

“Okay! Once we make contact, climb the siege tower onto the walls, and establish a bridgehead for our allies to—” As the commander was giving orders, Kuu suddenly leaped out from behind the walls to stand on the ramparts. His eyes met those of the siege tower’s commander. Kuu’s dauntless smile gave the man chills, and he forgot to finish his command.

“Thanks for coming all this way,” Kuu addressed the siege tower’s soldiers. “I’d love to congratulate you, but this is as far as you go.”

He raised his cudgel...

Boom!!! Crash!!!

A thick square pillar shot out of the wall, smashing right through the center of the approaching siege tower. The walls of Tarus were made of square blocks, and one of the big ones had suddenly been propelled outward.

“Ahhhh!”

“I’m falling! I’m falliiiiiing!”

Its supports smashed, the siege tower crumbled, raining debris on the soldiers below. The other approaching siege towers could also be seen being crushed by stone pillars from the wall.

Kuu smiled at the sight. “Ookyakya! Did you see that?! Our walls aren’t just defensive!”

When Kuu gave Tarus and Leporus a makeover, he’d had Taru, Trill, and the other technology team members implement many of his ideas. One of them was installing these massive pile drivers that shot out of the walls. The basic technology for the pile driver had already been established, as one of the pieces of equipment used in the fight with Ooyamizuchi.

“Why did they have to be actually useful...?” Leporina said with an exasperated sigh.

The idea of walls that fight back was amusing, but the pile drivers were completely useless unless some kind of massive enemy approached—like the siege towers or perhaps a giant monster. Also, now that they’d been seen, the enemy would come prepared next time. As they were weapons that only worked on those who hadn’t seen them, even Taru, who had built the things, questioned their utility. Maybe the fact that he’d gotten results from such a bizarre weapon was part of what made Kuu so amazing.

“But Master Kuu? I wouldn’t expect them to work next time, you know?”

Kuu blew off Leporina’s comments with his monkey-like laugh. “Well, think of it like stage magic. Once they know how the trick works, the audience gets bored. That’s why you’ve got to change your act regularly. Make ‘em think the pile driver’s coming, and then... Nope, nothing! Wouldn’t that be funny?”

“Just what are you fighting against, Master Kuu...?” Leporina gave him an exasperated shrug.

It was reassuring to see him able to engage in casual banter like this while facing a superpower like the Great Tiger Empire. Despite being shorter than her, he looked so reliable, and Leporina wouldn't have had anyone else as her husband or the leader of her country.

Kuu stretched his arms and then clapped his hands together.

"All right, let's show these folks from the Great Tiger Empire some more fun!"



Meanwhile, the Great Tiger Empire's trebuchets were attacking another front. These weapons lacked the range of cannons but had the advantage of being able to throw anything from cannonballs to rocks to explosive barrels to grapeshot. The big thing, though, was that they were a low-cost option, so Mercenary State Zem had collected quite a number of them.

Trill and her technology team were working on the final adjustments to the portion of the wall that was facing a fierce attack.

"Lady Trill! The enemy's attacks are intense, and the damage to the walls is growing!" screamed an engineering team member.

"I already know!" Trill shouted. "Just a little longer... And this goes...here!"



With her work done, Trill pressed the button, and the cursed ore battery that was also used in the Little Susumu Mark V began sending energy to the walls. After she ensured that it was working, a sense of relief washed over her.

She murmured, “Kuu certainly comes up with some surprising ideas. Like, ‘You know how the walls get attacked by siege weapons, right? Well, why don’t we have them move to avoid it?’”

With a rumble, the wall before her began to move, catching those on the other side off guard.

“Wh-What?! Why is the wall moving?!” shouted a soldier.

“The wall! The wall is coming right at us!” yelled another.

This nightmarish scene threw the attacking soldiers from the Great Tiger Kingdom into utter disarray. Additionally, fist-sized balls of lead rained down from the wall, piercing the soldiers’ armor and speeding up the descent into chaos.

In order to withstand enemy attacks and allow the men to traverse across them, the walls of Tarus were built thick. The idea was that a section of about half their thickness could detach and attack like a self-powered siege tower using the principle of the drill. This wall-type siege tower also had lion-dog guns (small cannons) from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago installed to fire down at enemies.

The Republic, much like the former Zem, was not a rich country. However, thanks to trading medical equipment and marine products with other countries of the Maritime Alliance, its economy had grown to be much larger than the former Zem’s. They could afford to operate these kinds of gunpowder armaments now.

The wall-type siege tower advanced through the center of the fleeing Great Tiger Empire troops, moving right up in front of the trebuchets. Trebuchets and cannons were powerful weapons, but took a lot of time to change targets. And aiming at something on the move was essentially impossible.

As the soldiers guarding the trebuchets ran away, oil pots and hot coals were thrown at them, burning all of the trebuchets until they fell apart.

“Thank goodness. It seems to have gone well.”

Trill and her team watched the wall-type siege tower do its work through a gap in the wall. The detachment of the siege tower left a square-shaped indentation behind, but not a hole that went all the way through.

“But we can’t simply stay and watch. We must head back at once!”

This spot, which had been inside the wall just a little while ago, was exposed to the outside now that the siege tower had detached. The forces of the Great Tiger Empire were in disarray for now, but if they attacked, she and her team of noncombatants would be helpless.

Trill urged her group to quickly evacuate through a little door that had been installed for that purpose.

Whoosh... Slash! There was a sound like something cutting through the air, and then one of the fleeing technicians was neatly bisected.

Trill stared in shock at the sudden splash of blood as a berserker carrying an ax appeared on the other side of the slumping body.

“Was it you people?! Are you the ones trying to pull all these little tricks?!” they snarled. It was the battle maniac of the Great Tiger Empire, Nata, with eyes like a starving beast’s, oozing the desire to kill, and reeking of bloodshed.

This was Trill’s first time on a battlefield, and her knees gave out underneath her. *This is crazy! Totally crazy, Big Sister Genia!* She teared up, trying to back away as she sat on the ground but cowering so hard that her body wouldn’t listen.

Nata continued striding towards her.

“You Maritime Alliance types all try to be so tricky! Just let me enjoy a pure battle, would you!” he roared at her, raising his ax to strike.

I’m going to die, Trill thought as she screamed, “Save me, Big Sister!”

The faces of Maria, Jeanne, and Genia, whom she looked up to like a sister, flashed through her mind. Trill shut her eyes tight, imagining this was what the moment just before death must be like. But then...

“At least call for someone who *can* come save you!” came a voice from above

her.

Trill's eyes snapped open, and Nata jumped backwards just as he had been about to swing the ax down on her. There stood a young man with a spear in his hands, having thrust it into the ground where Nata had been standing. If he'd reacted any slower, she'd have been skewered through the brainpan.

Nata's eyes flashed with rage as he recognized who'd just dropped in. "Why, you! Nike!"

"It's you, Nike!" Having recognized her rescuer, Trill cast a pleading glance at him.

Ignoring his brother Nata, Nike looked at Trill and nodded.

"Don't do anything too reckless. I've already got my hands full serving an eccentric master like Lord Kuu. If you heap more trouble on me, it's going to give me stomachaches."

"I-I'm ever so sorry!"

As the two of them talked, Nata got mad at being ignored. "Hey, Nike! You think you can oppose your big brother? Huh?!"

Nike pulled his spear from the ground and pointed it at Nata.

"Please, don't worry. Big Sister Sami, Ichiha, and I all hate your guts. So I feel no hesitation about striking you down here." He lowered his voice to a whisper and said, "Big Sister Mutsumi and Big Sister Yomi aren't too fond of you, for that matter..."

"Bullshit!"

Enraged, Nata swung his ax at Nike with enough power to split a rock. Nike dodged like a matador evading a bull, then thrust at his brother's flank. Nata knocked the swift thrust aside with just his fist. Then he swung his ax horizontally, intending to cleave Nike's torso in two. Nike jumped out of the way, and swung his spear down on Nata's shoulder. *Crack!*

"Guh...!"

The shoulder of Nata's armor fractured, and he let out a grunt of pain. But as Nike landed, Nata sent him flying with a heavy kick squarely to the stomach.

Thump!

“Urgh!”

It only took one kick to send Nike sailing high through the air. As he fell, he adjusted his position and maneuvered to land next to Trill.

“A-Are you quite all right, Nike?” she asked him, sounding concerned.

“Tch! Whew... For someone who brags about nothing but his strength, I guess this is about what I expected from my big brother,” he quipped, rubbing his stomach.

That kick could’ve taken him out of the fight instantly if it had hit him in the wrong place, so of course, his current casual demeanor was part bluff. Still, Nike managed to trade blows on an even footing with Nata.

“You think you can beat me?!” Nata spat.

“I don’t think I’ll lose. After all...”

Smack! This time, Nike kicked Nata. However, as Nata was built like a boulder, he didn’t move. Instead, Nike was sent flying backwards. But this was what Nike had been aiming for, and he hadn’t so much been trying to kick Nata as use him as a stepping stone.

He landed next to Trill again. “Okay, looks like everything’s ready...”

“Huh? Ready for what?” Trill blinked in confusion.

“I’ve got a brain, unlike my brother here!” Nike flashed a grin at Nata.

“Huh? What’re you on about...?”

“Big Brother. With the siege tower out, you realize this is a square indentation, right? You shouldn’t attack a spot like this!”

As he said this, Nike scooped the fallen Trill up in his arms, then kicked off the ground with his legs wreathed in wind magic. This jump carried them about halfway up the wall, where Nike thrust his spear and hung from it. As Nata stared in momentary disbelief, he heard the sound of wind moving around him. Looking up, he saw countless arrows raining down.

From above, Nike shouted, “That sort of square indentation is an easy target

for concentrated fire from ranged weaponry! If you're a man of the House of Chima, with our reputation for strategy and politics, you ought to know that!"

"Damn you, Nikeeee!"

Nata was enraged by his brother's taunting, but not even he could withstand this hail of arrows. Though many pierced him, he swung his ax around to ward off fatal blows, then pulled out of the area.

After seeing his brother go, Nike let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you. You saved me," said Trill, hanging in the air with him. "But I would appreciate you escorting me in a somewhat more elegant manner. I'll have you know I suffer from a fear of heights."

"What a demanding princess."

"Complain all you like, but I find all this swaying most unsettling—ulp!"

Trill covered her mouth as she fought off a wave of nausea, causing Nike to panic.

"Aghhhh! I'll do something about it right away, so hold it in a little longer!" He quickly used his wind magic to race the rest of the way up the wall.

Considering his losses in this siege battle, Moumei concluded it would be difficult to wrest the two cities from the Republic with just this army and shifted his strategy to encirclement. At the very least, he would keep the Republic out of Souma and Fuuga's battle.

Kuu had prepared a defense, but he felt the risk of an attack was too great, so both sides ended up staring each other down. From there on, this front entered a stalemate.



While a vigorous back-and-forth struggle unfolded on the Republic front, there was another battlefield with no movement at all. That would be the Euphoria Kingdom front.

The Great Tiger Empire force here was led by Shuukin Tan, the Sword of the Tiger, with chief bureaucrat Lumiere acting as his second-in-command. Their allies on the Father Island of the Spirit Kingdom had also sent Princess Elulu,

who adored Shuukin, and a number of high elf volunteer soldiers.

On the side of the Euphoria Kingdom were soldiers led by Queen Jeanne herself, with Prime Minister Hakuya and General Gunther's support. This army also included Sami Chima, the librarian of the great library in Valois Castle, who had joined them, saying, "I won't let the Great Tiger Empire take my place of solace...or the people I care about from me ever again." Piltory, the Kingdom of Friedonia's resident ambassador in the Euphoria Kingdom, was also on their side as a guest commander.

The two armies were spread out with mountains and forests on either side, but the center was an open field used for agriculture with just a single little house standing on it. They faced each other down on either side of the field, each side having around fifty thousand soldiers, but there was no sign of combat breaking out. While both sides were prepared to react instantly to any move by their opponent, neither showed any sign of moving themselves.

More than that, the aforementioned commanders were gathered in the Western-style farmhouse between the two armies. Now, as for what they were doing there, while a hundred thousand men stared across the anticipated battlefield...

"Lord Shuukin. Would you care for another cup of tea?"

"Oh, thank you, Madam Anzu."

"Will you be having tea or coffee, Lady Jeanne?"

"Thank you, Madam Shiho. I think I'll have coffee."

Next to a small brook, in front of a shed with a water wheel attached to it, Jeanne, Hakuya, Shuukin, Lumiere, and Elulu were sitting at a large table enjoying a spot of tea. Serving them were Piltory's wives, the sisters Anzu and Shiho.

Both sides had brought their bodyguards (Gunther, Sami, and Piltory were included), but the guards simply stood there. Things felt relaxed, and they didn't bother with more than cursory poison testing.

Because everyone deployed to this front was a sharp, analytical thinker, they understood the situation clearly. Victory or defeat here wouldn't have an effect

on the larger war.

Shuukin's role was to prevent the Euphoria Kingdom from attacking the Great Tiger Empire from the west side of the continent. The most concerning scenario for him would be an invasion by the Euphoria Kingdom, causing panic among the main force that Fuuga was leading to attack the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Meanwhile, Jeanne was very concerned about whether Shuukin's forces would push them back and then boast about how ineffective the Maritime Alliance was, putting cracks in her ability to coordinate with her allies. That would disadvantage Souma, who was fighting in the east. For that reason, she needed to stop Shuukin and his men's invasion here.

In short, both sides had three things in common: defense was their highest priority, they couldn't afford to lose the battle, and the final result would be decided by the direct showdown between Souma and Fuuga.

Even if Shuukin were to invade, he would not face an easy war against Queen Jeanne and the Black-Robed Prime Minister Hakuya. If he let his guard down, he expected they would trip him up. He also believed that, with their recently reorganized army, Jeanne and Hakuya would be at their limits just defending, and they couldn't manage a counteroffensive.

Since both sides understood that a battle would cause unnecessary bloodshed, they discussed and agreed to keep things calm here until the battle in the east was settled.

"Jeanne. Will these conditions be acceptable?"

"Yes. I don't mind, Lumi," Jeanne said as she accepted the paperwork.

It was a contract with signatures from both Jeanne and Shuukin.

To summarize: it stipulated that if the Kingdom of Friedonia was defeated by the Great Tiger Empire, the Euphoria Kingdom would immediately surrender. If the Great Tiger Empire was defeated by the Kingdom of Friedonia, Shuukin and his men would withdraw. Until then, neither side would move their troops or engage in looting.

Jeanne looked through the paperwork, then passed it to Hakuya, sitting beside her.

While Hakuya read, Jeanne spoke to Shuukin. “I’ve heard many of the Great Tiger Empire’s warriors are bloodthirsty. I’m grateful that it was you and Lumi, who are capable of thinking through things in a rational way, who came here.”

“Well, we have a lot of people who live in the moment, after all. If this front had been left to someone who failed to understand the importance of maintaining our battle lines, paired with the low priority of victory here, I suspect you all would’ve run circles around them,” Shuukin said with a wry smile. “Anyway, you’re quite sure the terms are acceptable? If we lose, we withdraw, but if you lose, you surrender. It hardly seems like a fair deal to me.”

“There’s not much helping that,” Hakuya responded. “This is the most you can promise us, Sir Shuukin. Further compensation in the event of a Maritime Alliance victory will be negotiated after the war. However, if King Souma is defeated, the Euphoria Kingdom lacks the power to stand alone against the Great Tiger Empire. We’ll have no choice but to surrender.”

“You say that so easily... It’s as if you don’t think you could lose.”

“Neither myself, Queen Jeanne, nor King Souma fights battles we cannot win,” Hakuya said with a calm expression on his face. His audacity brought a slightly sharper look to Shuukin’s eyes.

“Hey, hey, Lord Shuukin! These cream puffs are super delicious!” Elulu proclaimed as she scarfed them down next to him. This caused all the tension in the air to rapidly dissipate.

Shuukin held his temples and let out a sigh. “Elulu... I’m begging you, please, take this a little more seriously.”

“You say that, Lord Shuukin, but with food this good in front of me, I *have* to savor it. I hear this cream filling uses bean tea (coffee) from the Spirit Kingdom.”

“The Maritime Alliance trades with the Mother Island, after all,” Jeanne said, regarding Elulu with a smile.

After that, Jeanne turned to look at Lumiere again. Lumiere looked back at her, their gazes colliding. There was a tense look on both their faces.

They had been the best of friends once, but Lumiere had betrayed Maria and Jeanne to side with the Great Tiger Empire. There were probably people in the

Euphoria Kingdom who detested her and all the other commanders and nobles who'd switched sides, but Jeanne couldn't bring herself to hate a former friend that badly. Especially knowing that her withdrawal was something that Maria had intended to happen.

As for Lumiere, she had stayed true to her beliefs. No matter what she might be called as a result, she had no regrets about having split from the two of them. However, having experienced a small part of the responsibility Maria had once borne, she had a new respect for her former sovereign. Neither hated the other as much as they probably should have in their current positions.

As awkward as the situation was, Jeanne hesitantly opened her mouth. "Lumi... Um...have you been eating properly?"

"What? You're starting with that? I'd expect it from a father who doesn't know what to say to his adolescent daughter, but not you."

"Well, you look like you've lost weight."

"I have more work on my shoulders than when I was in the Empire... And now I understand just how incredible Lady Maria was. To know she carried it all on her own shoulders is just amazing... It's so exhausting."

"Yeah. I've been having the same realization myself."

They both sighed.

Lumiere looked straight at Jeanne. "I don't regret the path I chose. The fact is, the Demon Lord's Domain was liberated."

"But...I hear you took considerable losses forcing your way in. If we had understood the demons—the Seadians—properly...couldn't we have avoided spilling blood entirely?"

"I understand that that's what Lady Maria was looking to do. But you can only argue that in hindsight. When there's a future that you can reach without bloodshed, but you never know when it will come, and a future you can strive for right now, even if it means blood will have to flow...it's up for debate which you should choose."

"That's true... I understand that. Ultimately, we have different ways of looking

at things. It's just...I worry that you're overworking yourself."

"Oh, I am overworking myself. If I don't do at least that much, I wouldn't be able to face you sisters." Lumiere smiled slightly. "I know it's coming late, but congratulations on your wedding, Jeanne."

"Th-Thank you... It's rather embarrassing when you say that so formally."

"I always knew you'd marry an older man. You always had this mature aura about you."

"Y-Yeah, you were always into younger men, right, Lumi? Have you found anyone good?"

"Urkh... W-Well, it's not like I don't have anyone in mind."

"Oho. I'd love to hear the details."

""Ahem.""

""Huh?!""

As their conversation gradually drifted to girls' talk, Hakuya and Shuukin loudly cleared their throats. An awkward silence followed soon after.

Elulu watched them with amusement as she reached for another cream puff. Shuukin tried to move things along by talking to Hakuya.

"You know, I was quite surprised to find the Black-Robed Prime Minister, Sir Hakuya, over here. I was sure you'd be at King Souma's side."

"I already gave my overall commands, and individual issues are better addressed by Duchess Walter or Julius the White Strategist. Besides, my successor, Sir Ichiha, is there, so I expect they should have no issues despite my absence."

"You're reminding me how many people the Kingdom of Friedonia has... And Lady Mutsumi's younger brother Sir Ichiha is your successor?"

"Yes. He's a young man fit to carry the next generation."

"The next generation, huh... I envy your ability to say that." There was a slight sadness in Shuukin's expression as he spoke. "For us, my lord and friend Fuuga Haan is simply too blindingly brilliant. He's the great man who rapidly built us

up from a minor nation to a great empire. Everyone understands that no one could ever take Lord Fuuga's place."

"You saw how it was with Lady Maria... You understand, don't you, Jeanne?" Lumiere asked.

"I suppose I do..." Jeanne nodded. "My sister certainly shone brightly in her time as empress. If you asked me to live up to her glory, I'd find it difficult. I have a lot of hard thinking to do even now, with the country reduced in size."

"Yeah...which is why I wanted us to do as much as possible while Lady Maria still shone. But that wasn't what Lady Maria wanted..."

"I think now...I can understand how it must have felt for you, Lumi."

When a ruler shines brilliantly, the fear of losing their radiance can lead to a narrowing of perspective. People try to do something while that light lasts and don't think about what will come after. The charisma of leaders like Maria and Fuuga drove those around them to that point. No one could say that was bad, but...

"If I could say just one thing..." Hakuya began, and everyone paid attention. "I'm glad that our King Souma is so plain. He is still irreplaceable, but at least the people are able to think optimistically. 'Well, there are many others who are more talented and stand out more than he, so surely someone can take over for him.'"

As Hakuya spoke of his ruler's blandness with a shrug, everyone smiled wryly.

They all thought, *Maybe a ruler like that is fine too.*

All was quiet on the western front...



Chapter 6: For Whom Do You Fight?

While a bloodless staredown continued on the Euphoria Kingdom front, intense bloodshed was occurring on the Lunaria-Amidonia front.

Anne, the Saint of the Tiger, led her forces to attack the Amidonia Region of the Kingdom of Friedonia. This front was just one of many diversions, but the army of the Orthodox Papal State was made up of devout adherents, and they had no compunctions about spilling blood for religion.

“Victory for Saint Anne! Glory to Holy King Fuuga!”

“Don’t cling to your lives! Lady Lunaria is watching over our work!”

“Heathen and heretic blood will guide us to Lady Lunaria’s side!”

“Don’t fear martyrdom! Let’s march towards paradise!”

With these fanatical cries, the forces of the Orthodox Papal State charged towards the Kingdom of Friedonia’s National Defense Force. The Friedonian forces were loath to let this kind of mob into their country, so they’d deployed to block the invasion route and met them on the field of battle.

The Orthodox Papal State was less powerful and wealthy than even the Amidonia Region on its own, so their equipment was rather shoddy when compared to the Kingdom’s National Defense Force. In addition, the wounds of their recent political upheaval remained unhealed. The Orthodox Papal State, which normally should’ve been able to field fifty thousand soldiers, and just as many volunteers on top of that, could only mobilize fifty thousand men in total. And among them, seventy percent were said volunteers.

Their forces charged towards the Amidonian Front Force and their well-prepared defensive line. It was like punching a steel wall with their bare hands, and the Orthodox Papal State’s forces bled a lot for the attempt. Still, this didn’t stop them. They continued to advance as arrows rained down and spears pierced their chests. Even if they saw a comrade felled by an enemy blade

before their eyes, they would climb over the dead body to attack. These pious men saw death in battle as the way to paradise.

“Kill them! The way of righteousness is to kill as many of these infidels as possible.”

“Such a path could never be righteous!”

Two swords flew through the air and carved an X into the commander, who was leading the fanatics on horseback. A female knight with lion ears and a tail leaped over him and landed nimbly on the other side. It was Mio C. Carmine, daughter of the former General of the Army, Georg Carmine. She was here today as the head of the restored House of Carmine.

The leader of the Amidonian Front Force was Halbert’s father, Glaive Magna. The commanders serving under him were either those from the former Army who had ties to the House of Carmine or people who came from the Amidonia Region. Essentially, those who lived closest to this land were defending it. Because of this, the defenders’ morale was high, as they felt they were protecting their own domains and hometowns.

“Victory to the saint!”

“Punishment for the infidels!”

“Tch!”

Slice! Mio cut down both her assailants with one slash.

Despite their shoddy equipment, the soldiers of the Orthodox Papal State charged at the obviously powerful Mio and were easily slain. As they went down, there was almost a look of satisfaction on their faces.

Mio bared her fangs and glared at them.

“Your deaths are in vain! The only time it’s a virtue to care so little for your lives is when you fight to defend something you cannot give up on! When you come at us and die, it’s all for nothing! Don’t you understand that?!”

Her voice fell on the deaf ears of the Orthodox Papal State, who fought for faith alone. No words could reach those who did not listen. Mio mentally clicked her tongue at them. *It looks like they won’t back down in the face of Sir*

Julius's infamous reputation this time...

When the Kingdom of Friedonia had intervened in the previous war between the Gran Chaos Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom, they'd been able to shake up the forces of the Orthodox Papal State by making it appear as though Julius, the feared "Bloody Prince," had been about to invade. Now, however, because they anticipated that the enemy would take measures to counter this, the Black-Robed Prime Minister and White Strategist Julius agreed that he should not fight on the Amidonian front. In fact, because the combatants this time were the Orthodox Papal State's fanatics, they would attack with reckless abandon if their hated foe appeared.

If that happened, the Kingdom's National Defense Force would incur considerable losses. Although, even without Julius here, the enemy's reckless charge was still forcing the Friedonian forces on the defensive. They knew this offense couldn't last long, but unlike these zealots who didn't fear death, the soldiers of the National Defense Force had families and homes they wanted to return to. Because of their superiority over their opponents, they were paralyzed by inaction out of a desire to preserve their own lives.

The Orthodox Papal State's forces continued to push, and there were even places where the defense began to collapse. Mio led a force to those spots to provide support, but she felt the pressure. She wanted this one-sided battle to end so she could return to her beloved Colbert and have him indulge her to her heart's content.

"We will die and go to paradise..."

"Oh, shut up!"

Fed up with this one-sided battle, Mio swung to slay her opponent, but...

What?! A child?!

It was a young boy who couldn't have been more than fifteen.

The armed forces of the Orthodox Papal State must have been desperate for volunteers. While only a small percentage in the grand scheme of things, child soldiers were mixed in with the other zealots.

As Mio instinctively withdrew her blades, two adult soldiers joined the boy,

attacking her from behind. Mio dodged the boy's spear, but the men's swords raced towards her while she was still off-balance.

"For Lunaria!"

"Die, infidel!"

Oh no! Mio panicked, but suddenly a large man appeared, cutting down both the attacking soldiers.

"Don't let your guard down," he bellowed, following up his attack with a hard kick to the boy's solar plexus.

The boy doubled over in pain as the large man confiscated his weapons, then seized him by the scruff of the neck and threw him to the rear. Men dressed all in black were waiting, and they gagged and bound the boy before hauling him off.

The large individual, donning black armor, wiped the blood from the Nine-Headed Dragon katana gifted to him by King Souma. As he sheathed his weapon, he gazed at the lion-eared female.

Mio's eyes watered when she recognized who it was.

"F-Fath— Urgh!"

He gave Mio a sharp blow to the head.

"You still have much to learn," he said.

This individual who stood over Mio and protected her as she clutched her head and groaned was none other than Kagetora...commander of the Black Cats.

"If there is a time when you can show mercy on the battlefield, it is only once you have completely overwhelmed your opponent. You cannot possibly have that kind of leeway otherwise. Because their faith is blind, these enemies fight with conviction."

"Urgh... Yes, sir!" Mio stood up straight and answered, one hand still on her aching head. She looked like an apprentice who was finding new motivation after a sharp rebuke from her master.

Seeing Mio had recovered, Kagetora turned with a swish of his identity-cloaking cape.

“We will help where the defenses are on the verge of collapse. My subordinates are currently probing the inside of the enemy camp. Prepare yourselves so that you are ready to go on the offensive once we know the location of the Great Tiger Empire’s regular army.”

With that said, he left.

Mio brushed the tears from her eyes, looking straight forward as she answered, “Yes, sir!”

At this point, a unit led by Margarita Wonder, who had once been a general for the former Principality of Amidonia, came to their aid. Though she was a singer now, she had returned to active service in order to answer the threat to her homeland.

“Madam Mio! Are you all right?!” shouted the former general as she dismounted.

Mio nodded. “Yes! I’m just fine, Madam Margarita!”

Her energetic response was met with a look of relief.

“Thank goodness. You really made me sweat when you headed off for a spot where the defense looked ready to fall with so few soldiers. Sir Glaive must be worried too.”

“Sorry... You can scold me later. But right now...”

“Yes, you’re right. We’ll need to send these guys packing first.”

Mio and Margarita stood side by side. The Duchy of Carmine had once been the shield that defended the Elfrieden Kingdom from the Principality of Amidonia. Because of that, the Amidonian soldiers and the former subordinates of the House of Carmine had been frequent enemies. Mio and Margarita, two women who belonged to formerly opposing forces, were now comrades in arms. It was an experience that served to rouse their spirits even in the face of this exhausting war.

“Let’s go, Madam Mio! To defend our homelands!”

“Yes! We’ll defend it to the end!”

The two of them fell into fighting stances together.

It is said that zealots are more aggressive towards heretics than heathens. This is because heathens have not yet been exposed to the path the believers feel is righteous, and there is room for them to be saved through conversion. But the heretic follows a mistaken belief while professing the name of the same deity; there is no chance of their salvation.

For an easy example from Earth’s history, you can look at the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. In the Thirty Years’ War—which turned from a war of religion to an international conflict—Catholics carried out massacres in Protestant cities, and the enraged Protestants murdered their Catholic captives as they begged for their lives. This, despite both sides being Christian.

This was partially because those in power took advantage of religious authority. It was inconvenient if the beliefs that justified their rule were too similar to those spread by another ruler. It led to confusion and concern that their own adherents would be drawn in by the similar faith, like a kind of internecine hatred. That’s why the leaders of the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State loathed Archbishop Souji and Mary, who had set up the heretical sect known as Kingdom Lunarian Orthodoxy.

More than seventy percent of the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State’s forces were volunteers rounded up to fight a “holy war.” They were what you might call “soldiers of the faith”—zealots. Despite being so hastily assembled, they threw themselves at the regular forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia so boldly because there were holy men who inflamed their fervor.

“Fight! Bring the hammer of God down on these heretics!”

“Exterminate the Friedonians who spread false teachings!”

“Lunaria is watching you! Fight bravely as soldiers of God!”

The militant clerics shouted to encourage the zealots.

Their violent and bellicose rhetoric came from the uncertainty eating away at

them. There had been constant purges in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State these past few years. They had started with the rise of Fuuga Haan.

The group that supported him clashed with those that viewed him as a threat. Everyone who'd opposed him, except for those who'd fled the country like Mary and the saint candidates, found themselves suppressed as heretics. And so, after the war between the Great Tiger Kingdom and the Gran Chaos Empire, those who simply wanted to make use of Fuuga's authority and those who worshipped him came into conflict. The worshippers led by Saint Anne won out, burning the ones who had only wanted to use him at the stake.

In short, the clergy of the Orthodox Papal State had been shown what would happen to the losers in any political struggle. They found the very existence of Kingdom Orthodoxy extremely threatening. If Souma defeated Fuuga and Kingdom Orthodoxy rose in prominence, they might be the next to be burned as heretics. Their fear and unease drove them to act, and the zealots moved at their command.

Lombard saw the way they were fighting from the main camp of the Great Tiger Empire's forces. The unit of reinforcements that he and his wife, Yomi, led for the Great Tiger Empire remained in the main camp to guard Anne, who was effectively the commander of this army. They were strictly here to keep an eye on the Orthodox Papal State forces and had only brought a few hundred men. Their mission was to protect the central pillar, Anne, not to fight on the front lines.

"Despite all of the bloodshed... The Orthodox Papal State forces' morale hasn't fallen in the slightest," Yomi murmured.

Lombard, who was standing beside her, nodded in agreement. "It's terrifying to see them take on experienced soldiers with faith alone. I wouldn't want to fight against them or lead them in battle."

"Even though they're our allies?"

"Such men are ever turbulent. There is no controlling them. If they perpetrate massacres in the territory we take, there will be no way to rule it with any stability. Of course, I'm sure that Sir Hashim's goal is not to take territory at all, but to have them run wild and draw the enemy here..."

“So they’re just...disposable pawns?”

Hashim’s plans didn’t intend for the Orthodox Papal State to be able to push deep into the Amidonia Region. The zealots were not afraid of death but couldn’t carry out advanced military maneuvers. They would push against even the hardest points in the enemy’s defense, incurring losses, so even if they made it in deeper, their supply lines wouldn’t be able to keep up with them. Hashim was probably hoping they’d die gloriously while whittling down some of the enemy’s strength and drawing their attention.

As proof of that, when Lombard and Yomi had been sent to observe, the one thing they’d been cautioned against was not to overextend themselves and allow a total collapse.

Yomi looked towards the main camp of the Orthodox Papal State. “Does Madam Anne...understand that?”

“She must. She understands, and yet inflames the zealots anyway.”

“It pains me...looking at Madam Anne’s face now. She’s just like Sami was that day,” she said, her expression darkening.

She brought a hand to her chest as she recalled her estranged twin sister. Seeing Anne act like a soulless doll in her role as a saint reminded Yomi of when Sami had been despondent over the loss of her adoptive father, whom she’d loved so much.

Lombard showed gentle compassion to Yomi as the memories raced through her mind.

Meanwhile in the Orthodox Papal State’s main camp, Anne watched the battle with an empty expression.

The believers fought with faith in God and in her as a saint as they were wounded and fell. Anne didn’t bat an eye. The only way she could protect herself was to become a soulless puppet. Anne wouldn’t command the soldiers on her own. That was a job for the militant clerics to do. She merely stood here as their saint, telling them to fight. She believed that was the task set before her by heaven.

A change on the battlefield occurred as she watched. The believers had been charging onward recklessly, but their movements suddenly became strange.

Something was happening. Anne sensed it...

A faint singing voice drifted on the wind.

“Is that...a song?”

The voice was quiet enough to be lost in the din of the battlefield at first, but it gradually grew louder and soon became so distinct that she could make out the words. It was a Lunarian Orthodox hymn.

The voices were being carried all this way from the Kingdom of Friedonia’s camp.

Was this song dulling her zealots’ movements on the battlefield? She saw a large ball of water forming on the opposite side of the Kingdom of Friedonia’s forces. It was the kind used to display a jewel broadcast. As Anne realized this, the image of Mary, who had defected to the Kingdom of Friedonia, appeared.

“Hello, everyone. Can you hear me?” Mary said as she looked forward. “I am speaking to all the believers of Lunaria who are fighting on the battlefield. And to you, Anne...Lunarian Orthodox Saint.”

Anne jumped a little when she was mentioned by name. Despite how far away the image was, it felt like Mary was right there with her.

“Is my voice reaching you?”

In a room in a fortress a little to the south of the battlefield, Mary stood before a broadcast jewel, her eyes focused ahead.

“I am sure that you, the faithful, see us as heretics for accepting the protection of the Kingdom of Friedonia because the clerics you believe in have told you so. But can you still believe that when you hear this song?”

Mary fell silent, and the sound of a Lunarian Orthodox hymn could be heard.

This was the Lunaria Girls’ Choir, composed of the saint candidates who’d fled the country with Mary. Ever since it’d been discovered that songs could be used to give form to a magical image, thus increasing its power, the Kingdom of

Friedonia had been studying the relationship between songs and magic.

There was a secret art used in Lunarian Orthodoxy called Area Heal, and they'd learned that having the wounded sing along with the song increased the healing effects of recovery magic. As a result, the Kingdom of Friedonia had set up a broadcast program during which the Lunaria Girls' Choir would sing at all times, switching out members so they could take breaks as necessary. This song played at medical facilities on every battlefield, and Mary was playing it now to heal the wounded.

Mary spoke again. "As you know, this song is a Lunarian Orthodox hymn. It's no different between Papal State Orthodoxy and Kingdom Orthodoxy. So what is so different about us, who you call heretics? The Lunaria we believe in is one and the same. The foundation of Lunarian Orthodoxy is saving the weak and helping one another. Our beliefs have not changed. All that differs is whether our protectors are the Kingdom of Friedonia or the Great Tiger Empire."

With this, the look in Mary's eyes became harsh.

"Do those of you watching this understand the differences between us? Or is what you know simply true because your bishops and priests said so?"

Although it was mentioned earlier that the zealous are more aggressive towards heretics than heathens...that only applies to the ruling class, who are inciting those beneath them. The rank-and-file believers haven't thought it through that well. They're told to kill the heretics, so that's what they do, believing that it must be the truth. The higher-ups have told them they can do anything to the heretics, so any act against them, no matter how inhumane, is justified.

But when pressed to explain the reasons for persecution themselves, they're suddenly less confident. If one were asked to explain the difference between Nestorianism, Arianism, and Athanasianism, or the difference between Theravada and Mahayana, they wouldn't know unless they'd studied it. The only people who obsess over such differences are those in charge who fear the loss of their authority.

Mary presenting the hymn in this manner directly attacked the psychology of the soldiers of the faith. They wouldn't listen to reason, but the song was

familiar to their ears. Once they were in a listening mood, there was a chance Mary's voice might reach them.

"Let those in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State's forces hear our hymn."

This plan came from the Black-Robed Prime Minister, who was good at manipulating the intricacies of the heart. Now that they suspected their opponents might also be believers in the same Lunaria, even those who had previously been able to recklessly throw their lives away started to have doubts that dulled their edge. The weight of the sin of murder, which they'd forgotten in their fervor, started to feel very real to them once again. Most zealots were just ordinary people who had been pushed into service. The mental stress on them must have been incredible.

In practice, the song served to massively slow the zealots' maneuvers. Mary couldn't see it from where she was, far from the battlefield, but she spoke with conviction.

"In this country, I learned that faith is for the living, not the dead. It's there to support people in times when they are suffering, and it should not, by any means, be used as a tool to drive them to madness... Right, Saint Anne?"

Mary spoke to Anne as if she were right there with her.

"Who is *your* faith for?"

Anne had no words.

She grew up an orphan. Alone in the world, with nowhere to belong, and never needed by anyone. However, when she was chosen as a saint, she was finally needed by others, and that became her identity. Her selection as a saint was a message from heaven, telling her it was all right to exist in this world. That's why Anne played the role of a saint like others wanted her to. Even if people called her a doll, she believed that was her reason for existing. As long as she was a saint, people would need her. If asked who it was for, she'd be able to say it was for the people...or she should have been able to.

However, she'd seen too much blood for that. Those who had been burned as heretics; those seen as zealots who had fallen in battle, believing they were fighting for Lunaria—believing that she was a saint; the face of the man who'd

been brought past her on a stretcher one day and clung to her with his bloodstained hand. Countless deaths were seared into her memories.

No...I'm doing this...for Lady Lunaria...for the Holy King... Anne thought of beings higher than herself. She tried to justify nullifying her own will by convincing herself that this was all in line with their greater designs. However, she'd never met Lady Lunaria or heard her revelations directly. Holy King Fuuga had not treated her poorly, but sometimes he seemed to look at her with pity. She felt as though his eyes were the same as Mary's had been when she told her, "Come with me."

"Who is your faith for?" It was now that Anne realized she had no answer to Mary's question.

Then a large man appeared from off to the side of Mary. He was bearded with a shaved head, dressed not in his typical casual monk's outfit, but in a splendid vestment befitting an archbishop.

He stood beside Mary and spoke. *"Ahh... Ahem.* Adherents of Lunarian Orthodoxy, can you hear me? I am Souji, head of Lunarian Orthodoxy in the Kingdom of Friedonia. I know you're busy fighting, but just lend me your ears for a moment."

It was Archbishop Souji Lester of Kingdom Orthodoxy. The reason he called it Lunarian Orthodoxy in the Kingdom of Friedonia and not Kingdom Lunarian Orthodoxy was likely due to what Mary had said about there being hardly any difference between the two.

"Now, back when I was in the Orthodox Papal State, my teacher and those around him said this: Lady Lunaria is merciful. She offers the hand of salvation to everyone, no matter how sinful. Lunarian Orthodoxy is the teaching of how to accept that hand, and all of the faithful will be taken to Lady Lunaria's side after their deaths... Perhaps you've all been taught similarly?"

We have, thought Anne. That was exactly what she'd learned, and why she could believe that in her existence as a saint for the sake of Lady Lunaria.

Souji cracked his neck and then continued.

"Isn't that a little odd? If Lady Lunaria is willing to forgive anyone, no matter

how sinful, and all of the faithful will be saved after death, then what's it matter how we live? We'll be saved anyway, right? This tells us that so long as you believe, you don't have to *do* anything for the faith."

Huh...? His words gouged deep into Anne's heart. This was an absurd argument. *It's only Souji's personal interpretation.*

However, while thinking about this, she didn't outright reject the sentiment. In fact, every teaching rested on someone's interpretation of it. People couldn't meet God themselves, so no faith could be established without people interpreting the will of God.

"Once that thought occurred to me, I felt like I understood why the teachings tell us to aid the weak and help one another. If everyone who believes in Lady Lunaria will be saved, there's no need to help each other, right? But there are so many people suffering these days that, yes, we *do* need to help one another. Since the merciful Lady Lunaria will save us after our deaths, while we're in this world, we need to support one another until we die."

He paused to let his words sink in.

"Right now...your priests might be telling you, 'The path to Lady Lunaria is to die in battle,' but a truly merciful Lady Lunaria wouldn't discriminate between those who did or didn't fight here. Now, sure, you can fight. And even if you kill people or are killed yourself, Lady Lunaria's going to save you, but you really don't have to do that. You can run back to your families, and she'll *still* save you."

It was a crafty use of words. If he had said, "Lady Lunaria won't save you even if you fight here," then the zealots would've brushed it off as the enemy's nonsense. However, by stating that they'd be saved whether they fought or not, the zealots were made to wonder if his words were true. They would've ignored him outright if they felt he was repudiating them. But hearing his acceptance of their actions, they considered his viewpoint. This was all thanks to Souji's skills as an expert quibbler.

"Lady Lunaria will save those who believe in her. Believe in Lunaria, help the weak, and help each other... After that, you're *free to do whatever you want.*"

Souji's words broke the zealots.

They were free to fight and free to go home to their families. Either way, Lady Lunaria would save them. It was hard to continue fighting once they heard that. Some might've wanted to die here and have their salvation now, but that wasn't the will of the entire group. Once people began to run away to return to their families, others followed suit.

The battle lines of the Orthodox Papal State quickly fell into shambles as more and more fled, realizing their defeat. The Kingdom of Friedonia's forces did not pursue the fleeing zealots, focusing only on the soldiers who came at them, but many chose to run away.

Anne watched the total collapse of her forces in silence.

"Lady Anne! This battle is hopeless!"

"It's dangerous here! We must retreat at once!"

As the commanders with her offered their advice, the guards protecting the main camp were sent flying by a sudden cavalry charge.

"Seize Saint Anne! Once we do, victory is ours!"

A unit led by Mio Carmine had raced across the chaotic battlefield, penetrating the Orthodox Papal State's main camp. Mio rode on horseback, cutting down men with her two longswords as she passed, closing in on Anne, who could only stand there.

As she approached, a knight suddenly rode in from the side, striking at Mio with a lance.

"I won't let you!" he yelled.

"Urgh!" Mio blocked the attack, but her charge was stopped.

Lombard, the armored knight, commanded, "We'll take over from here! Forces of the Orthodox Papal State, retreat with haste!"

"You think I'll let you?!"

Mio's two longswords swung at Lombard. She had the skills to go toe-to-toe with Aisha, the Kingdom's greatest warrior, so Lombard was quickly forced onto the defensive, but he used his lance and shield to endure her attacks.

As they fought, Lombard shouted, “So long as we have Saint Anne, the Orthodox Papal State remains a threat that the Kingdom of Friedonia can’t ignore. You must pull back now, so as not to let this unit go after Lord Fuuga!”

Hearing him, the commanders next to Anne started to drag her away. Mio’s unit tried to pursue them, but Lombard’s men desperately pushed back.

“Ngh! Get out of my way already!”

“I refuse!”

While Lombard’s overall abilities were high, he didn’t have anything extraordinary that set him apart from other warriors. Still, his temperate personality and his sincerity meant that he was considered one of the more reliable people in the Great Tiger Empire. Despite Mio’s relentless onslaught, he held on to performing his duty.

Suddenly, Lombard’s lance shattered. He went to grab the sword at his hip, but Mio’s longswords were closing in.

“Lord Lom!” A chunk of ice shot along the ground towards them, forcing Mio back and putting some distance between them. Lombard’s wife, Yomi, had arrived in time with her unit of mages.

Yomi tried to order them to attack Mio, but Margarita rode in with a unit of her own from the Kingdom of Friedonia’s land forces, and they put up a defensive wall in front of Mio. A back-and-forth struggle broke out between the different units. But with the Orthodox Papal State forces fleeing while more of Friedonia’s forces gathered, only Lombard and his men remained, holding their ground.

Seeing that the retreat was finished, Lombard cast down his sword and shouted, “Hear me, my men, and men of Friedonia! With the Orthodox Papal State having fled, our job is done! Further fighting serves no purpose! Everyone, cast down your weapons! And men of Friedonia! We surrender, so please, let the hostilities end here!”

Once they heard Lombard, the fighting gradually stopped, and Lombard’s men dropped their swords to signal it was over. There was the ringing of weapons falling to the ground for a while, but eventually, the battlefield fell

quiet, and Lombard knelt before Mio, his head lowered.

“We give up our weapons. People of Friedonia, I wish you to know that the responsibility for this losing battle is mine, and I ask that you guarantee the safety of my troops!”

“Lord Lombard...” Yomi got down beside him, also lowering her head.

Seeing both of them, Mio and Margarita exchanged glances, then nodded together.

As their representative, Mio spoke. “For now, we will disarm the survivors and take them prisoner. His Majesty will be the one to decide what to do with you, but I can guarantee your safety until that time.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes...”

Lombard and Yomi bowed their heads.

The surviving soldiers who could still walk were bound and taken away while the wounded were carried away. Lombard and Yomi were the last to be tied up. As they were loaded onto a prisoner carriage, Mio called out to them.

“Umm... I know I probably shouldn’t say this right now, but, Madam Yomi, you’re Sir Ichiha’s elder sister, right? I have instructions from Sir Glaive to see that you’re treated with every courtesy.”

The two of them bowed their heads slightly at her words.

“I’m in your debt...”

“Thank you.”

And so the carriage took them away. Mio watched the carriage go by when she suddenly noticed Kagetora was standing beside her.

Without turning to look at him, she said, “Normally...I shouldn’t say that sort of thing to a defeated general. Will you scold me for it?”

It sounded almost like she wanted him to rebuke her. However, Kagetora neither nodded nor shook his head.

“You are already the head of the House of Carmine. You must choose for

yourself whether your decisions were correct.”

He neither confirmed nor rejected her methods. But the care in his voice brought a wan smile to Mio’s face.

“Ha ha... You’re as strict as ever.”

Meanwhile, around that same time...

Having finished the broadcast, Mary quietly observed as the members of the House of Juniro (the family of Ivan Juniro, who played Overman Silvan) carried off the jewel and other equipment. They’d already received word of their victory via messenger kui. Their job here was done. The forces of the Orthodox Papal State had collapsed, and some important commanders had been taken hostage. That being the case, another attack from across the border was unlikely.

“Little Miss Mary.”

Souji’s voice brought Mary back to her senses.

“Ah! Your Holiness.”

He scratched his head awkwardly, seemingly unsure what to say. “Um... Hey... You okay? You look rather troubled.”

“Oh... Do I?”

“Yeah. If you need to talk to someone, I’m all ears, you know? It’s part of church business, after all.”

“Now that you mention it, I suppose it is,” Mary said with a little laugh. “I was thinking about Anne.”

“The Great Tiger Empire’s saint?”

“Yes. She is...one possibility of what I could have become.”

Mary lowered her eyes, pained to think about it.

“She has no will of her own. Good or ill. She’s looking for a place to belong, and she’ll go on silencing her own thoughts and being a saint just so that someone will tell her it’s okay for her to be there. That’s the fate of an

orphaned girl chosen to be a saint candidate by the Orthodox Papal State.”

Souji was at a loss for words.

Mary had once been exactly the same. After being chosen as a saint for King Souma, she had the chance to leave the Orthodox Papal State and experience this country’s culture, and in doing so, she’d realized how warped it all was. But Anne never had that opportunity. Mary couldn’t help but think of Anne as similar to herself back then, having become a saint without knowing any other way of life.

“No matter how many faithful believers she sends to die on the battlefield... No matter how many of her political opponents are burned before her eyes... Deep down, she is still pure and innocent, doing what people ask her to.”

Tears streamed from Mary’s eyes. Tears for Anne.

“What... What I was saying earlier... It’s going to push her into a corner. I just told a girl who’s been suppressing her own will for the sake of others that she has to reflect on her actions. That’s forcing her to confront what she’s been looking away from to protect her own heart. If she looks back now, aware of all the bloodshed along her path, it could very well break her.”

Souji kept listening as Mary spoke, her words mixed with sobs.

“In all the world...I’m the one...who should understand her better than anyone else... And yet, I’m the one trying to destroy her place... I know...that I’m doing it for the greater good, but...that doesn’t mean it’s not frustrating...”

If Anne and the Orthodox Papal State had been left as they were, no doubt even more of this country’s blood would have been shed. Even if it hurt her emotionally, Mary couldn’t let herself regret it. Because if the people of this country heard her talking this way, they’d angrily ask if she thought they ought to be suffering instead. Filled with such thoughts and emotions, she felt something tighten in her chest.

“C’mere, little lady.”

“Your Holiness...?”

In a move that was rare for a guy as tactless as Souji, he gently put his arms

around Mary. He didn't tell her that she was right or wrong, he just wrapped himself around her like an unfamiliar vestment.

“Ohhh... Your Holiness... Wahhhhh!”

Like a dam breaking, the tears she'd been holding back rushed out. Souji gently patted her on the head as she wailed.

“The heart's not easy to heal. But time and compassionate people can gradually fill in the scars. I've seen it a lot in my line of work. When people want to rely on God, it's usually to vent about their suffering, so a lot of folks come talk to me about their emotional wounds.”

His words floated down to her from above.

“If someone is going to collapse from those wounds, and it's someone you care about, then keep extending the hand of salvation. You know how the king's been saying he's gonna train...psychologists, I think he called them? Some kind of heart doctor. And that he wants the Kingdom Church to help him with that, right? Well, maybe...this country can heal those wounds of the heart. So, little missy, you've gotta be ready to help her when the time comes.”

Mary raised her head. “Is it...okay to help her?”

She seemed uncertain, but Souji gave her a firm nod.

“Faith, and the church, are there to save the lost. That's a whole lot more churchy than suppressing heretics or stirring people up so they'll go off and shed blood for you, now isn't it?” he said in a deliberately jokey tone.

Wiping her tears, Mary nodded. “Yes, Your Holiness!”

Thus did the battle on the Lunaria-Amidonia front come to an early end with a victory for the Kingdom of Friedonia. However, while Lombard and Yomi were taken captive, Saint Anne was still out there, so the Amidonian Front Force had to remain on guard against the Orthodox Papal State.

The war would be decided by the showdown between Souma and Fuuga.

Chapter 7: Even If We Part

Before Fuuga Haan began his invasion of the Kingdom of Friedonia, Souma was having the people of towns and villages along the Great Tiger Empire's invasion route evacuate to the south of Parnam. He had more leeway to prepare this time than in the Amidonian War, so he didn't need to take drastic measures like inventing the Flame Pierrots to burn villages and drive people out for their own good. He could complete the evacuation just by spreading word of what was coming.

This was done because the great minds of the Kingdom agreed that, win or lose, the fighting would go no farther than Parnam. Some people wanted to stand and fight in the places of their birth, but the priority was evacuating noncombatants like children, women who didn't serve in the military, and the elderly.

The same was done in Parnam itself. Souma had Poncho take over for Weist as the lord of Venetanova, now the Kingdom's second largest city. This allowed the gourmet to evacuate there along with Ginger, Genia, and the other noncombatants and their families. Poncho had been Souma's magistrate in Venetanova once upon a time. But when the title was originally handed out, it was decided that giving such a key city to a relative newcomer like Poncho would result in major pushback. Instead, it had gone to Weist, who had long served under Excel. However, with his efforts in the food crisis and war logistics, Poncho now had a distinguished career behind him, and it was safe to appoint him Lord of Venetanova.

The city was also home to many former refugees who looked up to his second wife, Komain, so he wouldn't have trouble ruling it. As for Weist, he was rewarded for his service by the expansion of his previous domain, Altomura.

Meanwhile, Souma was arranging for a certain someone to leave the capital...



“Roroa. I want you to move to Venetinoa with the children tomorrow.”

That night, I was alone in my room with Roroa, who was in her pajamas when I broached the topic. She looked at me like a child who’d just been slapped across the face for no good reason; it was a mix of shock, frustration, and sadness.

Still, she ground her back teeth as she tried to feign calm.

“You’re sure...I can’t be here...?”

“Yes...” I said. “There are things I want you to do in Venetinoa. If anything were to happen to us...you’re the only one I can count on to take care of things after that.”

“Take care of things if somethin’ happens to you? Do ya realize how awful you’re bein’, askin’ me to do that? I’d have to live on, takin’ care of the kids all by myself, y’know? With the shame of bein’ royalty from a country that no longer exists...”

“Sorry...”

“Don’t go apologizin’!” Roroa shouted, bringing her fist down on my chest.

It made a loud thump, but the punch of a frail woman like her didn’t hurt all that much. Roroa bit her lip in frustration as she realized that.

“There’s nothin’ more frustratin’ than not havin’ the strength to fight. Even Big Sis Juna, the lorelei, can go into battle...but when it comes to me, there ain’t a thing I can do in times like this...”

“Don’t say that. It’s thanks to you that our coffers are so full. That lets us face the war at our best. And I think that, Fuuga or no Fuuga, we’re more likely to come through this without losing than not.”

“It’s that last bit that’s worryin’ me.” Roroa took a step backwards and looked straight at me. “What’re ya gonna do with Yuriga and Big Sis Maria? Neither of them can fight either, right?”

“I have to consider Yuriga’s wishes, and I want her on hand to negotiate with Fuuga if necessary. As for Maria, she’s already away from the capital, doing her own thing. Besides...they married me only recently, so there are no children

yet. If I'm going to trust someone with all of our children, then she has to be one of their mothers herself—which means you, Roroa. I want you to look after Leon and the other kids.”

“It ain't fair, sayin' it like that...” Roroa lowered her eyes sadly for a time before looking up once more. “I had a feelin' this was comin' ever since we figured out Fuuga was gonna attack. I've done everythin' I can at this point, and there ain't much left I can do.”

“Roroa...”

“So count on me!”

Roroa struck a pose like a model, putting her right hand on the back of her neck and her left hand on her hip with a coquettish giggle. It was the same pose she'd struck the day we first met.

“If anythin' happens to you, darlin', then this here Amidonian beauty's gonna use all her skill and feminine wiles to kiss up to the big shots in Fuuga's court, and protect our children.”

She said it jokingly, but...I had no doubt she'd do exactly that. This was the girl who'd had the pluck to marry me, her father's killer, in order to protect the people of Amidonia. If it were to defend our kids, she could suppress her anger and hatred to marry the man responsible for my demise. No matter how she felt about it herself...

Seeing that I couldn't say anything in response, Roroa realized how I must be feeling and dived into my arms.

“What? You hate the idea that much, huh? Sure, Fuuga ain't as hardheaded as my old man, but he wouldn't let me have all this fun makin' money and spendin' it. You know you're the only one for me, darlin'. Now, if you do somethin' to let go of your cute wife and let 'er fall into the hands of another man, I'm gonna hold it against you for the rest of my life and beyond.”

“Yeah...I know.” I gave her a firm nod.

Roroa wrapped her arms around my neck. Her face came closer, and our lips pressed together. After a long kiss, she grinned at me.

“I’m really countin’ on ya, darlin’. Ya better come for me.”

“Yeah. Count on it.”

“Hee hee! Well, I don’t need to be headin’ off until tomorrow, right?” Roroa pressed herself tight against me, whispering in my ear. “How ’bout you try knockin’ me up once more. Just to be sure. There’s no tellin’ if we’ll conceive tonight, but... Well, if we do, I’ll take my profits where I can get ’em.”

She whispered seductive words to me with a shy smile.





Elsewhere in the castle, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga were saying their goodbyes too.

Yuriga would remain in the capital while Tomoe and Ichiha, as important noncombatant figures, would leave for Venetinoa tomorrow with Roroa.

“You’re...staying, aren’t you, Yuriga?” Tomoe asked, a pained look on her face.

Yuriga shrugged. “Yes, I am. I need to see the showdown between my brother and Souma through to the end. As a sister...and as a wife.”

“Um...I probably shouldn’t ask if you’re okay, right?”

“Right. I’ve already come to terms with it.” Yuriga put her hands on her hips and grinned. “You’re off to Venetinoa, yeah? Well, you two look after each other as future husband and wife, you hear?”

“It’s hard to feel that way...”

“Well, you’d better start. My husband and his gang of trusted companions are all ready to go, so I’m sure we’ll be able to meet up and smile together again in no time. Even if this country loses, I swear I’ll protect you two. You’re both important to this world, and I’ll make sure my brother understands that any harm that comes to you is a loss to everyone.”

“You sound like you could pull it off, but I’d rather you not find yourself in a position where you’d need to do that for us,” Ichiha said with a sigh.

In his capacity as Hakuya’s stand-in, Ichiha was in charge of political strategy, so there wasn’t much for him to do once war broke out. Julius and Kaede were handling military strategy, and he could give his political directives from the rear, so it had been decided that he would evacuate with Tomoe.

Yuriga gave Ichiha a light jab in the chest. “Don’t you worry about me. Keep an eye on your fiancée. Knowing her, she’s bound to say, ‘I’m going to stay too!’ and hide herself somewhere in Parnam.”

“Well...you have a point there,” Ichiha replied with a wry smile, knowing just how surprisingly active of a personality Tomoe had.

“Come on...” Tomoe puffed her cheeks out indignantly. “I don’t want to hear that from *you*, Yuriga, after you had us stow away on the ship to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.”

There was an awkward pause, followed by Yuriga saying, “...I don’t remember anything that happened that long ago.”

“It’s only been a few years.”

“Shut up, you little kid!” Yuriga pinched Tomoe’s cheeks. The two had been doing this ever since their school days. It triggered a feeling of loneliness that brought tears to both of their eyes as they smiled.

“Do you think...we’ll be able to do stupid stuff like this and laugh about it together again?” Tomoe asked with a smile.

“Oh, we’ll be able to laugh,” Yuriga answered with a slight grin of her own. “For sure. And Lucy and Velza will be there to laugh with us too.”

“That sounds good. I’d love to relax and munch on snacks with everyone again,” Ichiha said, and they both nodded.



The next day, Liscia, Yuriga, and I said our goodbyes and then watched as the wyvern gondola carrying Roroa, Tomoe, and Ichiha took off from the inner courtyard.

“We’ll...see them again, right?” Liscia asked, slightly worried. I laughed it off.

“Oh, please. Don’t talk in a way that’ll set off event flags like that. We just have to keep working quietly to prepare to meet Fuuga’s attack and defend the home they’ll be returning to.”

“Yes, you’re right... Are you okay, Yuriga?” Liscia asked with a hint of concern, but Yuriga shook her head.

“I’m prepared for what’s coming. We have to stop this...”

Stop this, huh? I clapped my hands when I heard the determination in her voice.

“Okay, let’s give him the welcome a great man deserves. If we’re going to end

his era, we need to prepare to make the times change.”

There was no turning back now. We walked forward with our eyes on the future.



Chapter 8: Illusions on the Kingdom Front

The invasion finally began as the main force of the Great Tiger Empire crossed the border of the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Fuuga and Hashim were expecting the other side to have some sort of scheme, and if they gave them time to prepare whatever it was, it would spell their defeat. Because of that, the situation called for a lightning war with a swift and conclusive victory. They needed to make it to Parnam as fast as possible and kill or capture Souma to make him surrender.

In order to pull that off, they would leave any towns, villages, or cities along their route that submitted to them intact but also thoroughly destroy any that opposed them so that they could continue on their way. Souma and his group knew this, so they evacuated the towns and villages and gave up on cities they couldn't protect early, focusing their forces on the cities they felt they could defend.

In the middle of the main force, marching forward with the bulk of their war potential, Fuuga, Hashim, and Mutsumi were listening to a report from their scouts.

"This is our report. There is no sign of anyone in the towns and villages along our route. No soldiers lay in wait there, and there was no sign of traps. We believe that they have already been abandoned."

"This is Souma we're talking about. He knows we're coming, so of course he'd get his people to run away," Fuuga said, crossing his arms.

Fuuga expected things to go one of two ways: they would either meet fierce resistance the moment they crossed the border or be allowed to get in deep without meeting meaningful resistance. It looked like it was going to be the latter. This way of fighting wasn't much fun for Fuuga, and was a pain to deal with. Which is why the Kingdom had chosen to use it, of course.

"However, some supplies, such as food and water, were left behind in the

villages,” the scout continued. “We’ve investigated them, and there was no sign that any of it had been poisoned.”

“Hmm? You’re saying that he evacuated the people but left behind provisions?” Mutsumi raised an eyebrow.

Normally, there’s no reason to leave food in a town or village that’s going to be abandoned. It would only ease the Great Tiger Empire’s logistics. Obviously, they needed to be wary that the food might have been tampered with, but it seemed that the Kingdom hadn’t even done that.

“What do you think his aim is in doing this, Brother?” Mutsumi asked Hashim, the military advisor.

Hashim brought his hand to his mouth as he considered the question, speaking once he’d put his thoughts in order.

“It’s likely...to ease our supplies.”

“Giving support to their enemies? Why?”

“Souma and his people don’t want us to get stuck or to go elsewhere. Our plan utilizes a specialty of Malmkhitan, mounted combat, which takes advantage of high mobility. We rush in as quickly as possible to assault the enemy, conquering the cities that resist us and looting them for supplies. That’s how we meant to maintain our momentum. However...if supplies are already provided, it saves us the trouble of pillaging.”

“I see,” Fuuga grunted. “He’s leading us towards the shortest route to Parnam.”

If their army found itself short on supplies, they would do whatever they needed in order to acquire more. That would likely lead to a loosening of military discipline, and soldiers might be sent to loot places that weren’t along the most direct path. The result would only expand the damage to the Kingdom, so it wasn’t something they’d want. That’s why they’d gone out of their way to leave supplies along Fuuga’s path.

As Hashim saw it, they were trying to control the forces of the Great Tiger Empire to keep them from diverging from their planned route.

“Is it to reduce the harm to innocent people?” Mutsumi asked.

Hashim shook his head. “Even if that was Souma’s hope, our enemies also include Hakuya the Black-Robed Prime Minister, Julius the White Strategist, and the venerable Excel. He might have done it to benefit the people, but they wouldn’t let him if it wasn’t advantageous.”

“So, what you’re saying is that Souma and his gang have got us in the palms of their hands... Is that it?” Fuuga asked and received a nod in response.

“Indeed. In fact, I’ve tried sending a number of small units to find detours that we might take, but they failed every time. This route is the only one that lets us move smoothly and quickly.”

“They failed? Were they ambushed by the enemy?”

“No,” Hashim said with a stern expression. “Something even more strange is afoot.”

“What...do you suppose this is?”

Hearing the reports from his scouts, Gaten, the Flag of the Tiger, took some of his best men and rode out on his temsbock to see if they were true. He was taken aback by what they found—the gloomy woods spread out before him.

According to what he’d been told before setting out, this was supposed to be a desolate field across which they could march a large army. Normally, he would have separated part of his forces into a detachment and attacked cities off the main force’s route in order to distract the Friedonian military.

Of course, the Kingdom’s forces would understand that, and so Hashim had told Gaten that they might’ve placed forces here to meet him, meaning this could be where the first battle of the war happened. But contrary to expectations, the Kingdom didn’t intercept him here. All he was met by was a sea of trees that stretched on for who knows how far.

“We sent out scouts yesterday. Was there a forest like this in the reports?” Gaten asked one of his men, who hurriedly shook his head.

“No, sir! The scout said nothing of it. I spoke to him earlier to confirm, and he

said, ‘I’m absolutely certain this was a barren field when I came here yesterday.’”

“Basically, this forest grew overnight, huh?” Gaten said, stroking his chin. *It’s hard to believe, and yet...facing King Souma of Friedonia, I wouldn’t be surprised to discover he has the means to do it.*

The Kingdom of Friedonia had thus far built island-like ships, bombs that neutralized magic, and other inventions that defied common sense. He’d heard rumors they’d even fought a sea monster with a mechanical dragon. It wouldn’t be all that strange for such a country to be able to make a forest spring up overnight.

It wouldn’t be strange...? It’s odd enough that they’re able to convince us that things that should be considered strange are seemingly normal. We’ve already been heavily poisoned by their influence.

Gaten was an easygoing man with a gaudy taste in fashion, but he was calm and composed when directing his troops.

Now that there was a forest, he couldn’t send out a detachment. Even if the forest were an illusion of some sort, dividing their forces against an enemy who could pull off something like this would lead to an utter defeat.

“We should give up on sending out a detachment. I’ll make the suggestion to Sir Hashim.”

With that, Gaten took his men and returned to his own camp.

A group quietly hid in the branches as they watched the Great Tiger Empire’s forces to see what they’d do. They all had tanned skin and the characteristically pointed ears of the elven race. These were the dark elves of the God-Protected Forest. Most were dressed in light armor and carried bows, but one wore a splendid robe. A young dark elf girl knelt before him.

“Lord Wodan. The enemy appears to have given up on coming through here.”

“Well done, Velza.”

The robed individual was Aisha’s father and the chief of the God-Protected Forest, Wodan Udgard. The girl kneeling before him was Halbert’s secretary,

Velza.

Standing nearby were Wodan's brother, Robthor, and Velza's father, Sur, to protect Wodan if needed.

The chief smiled softly. "It seems we've been able to direct the enemy. This will be of help to Aisha and my son-in-law."

The dark elves' mission was to plug up any detours or side routes along the invading army's projected course with woodland, preventing them from dispersing. This task required a high degree of mobility inside the forests, so it fell to the nimble dark elves, who were already forest dwellers.

"Yes! I'll go inform Parnam of this!" Velza said with a nod.

"Be careful, Velza," Sur warned. "And tell Sir Hal that I wish him luck in his battles."

"Yes, Father!" Velza nodded again, then jumped away.

Once he finished watching her go, Robthor patted the bark of a tree as he sighed.

"Arrows that can make a forest sprout overnight... King Souma really did create something incredible."

"No, I'm told these were developed before King Souma was summoned. They were apparently a failed experiment by the young lady from the House of Maxwell."

When he heard this, Robthor's eyes widened and he asked, "Really?"

Sur explained that the arrows were the very failure that had once seen Overscientist Genia driven out of the research and development branch. Her unconventional idea was that "War lays the land to waste, so let's invent arrows that will make trees grow where they fall," but things had gotten out of hand, and a research facility was swallowed up by the forest as a result.

Later, Genia would return to the front line of research and refine her invention thanks to Souma's efforts. The result was a reduction in growth, making it so the trees would die off after a short time. They couldn't make too much use of the arrows due to the cost of manufacturing and the

environmental effects, but the invention served its purpose admirably. This spontaneous forest would vanish in a few days.

Robthor let out a sigh of admiration. “To think there were such wonders in the outside world even before the king arrived...”

“Heh heh. Even as we shut ourselves away in the forest, the world continued changing, bit by bit. And it would have, whether my son-in-law came or not,” Wodan told Robthor with a mischievous grin. “We were right to open our eyes to that sooner rather than later. And that’s all thanks to my son-in-law, and Aisha, who left the forest on her own to go meet him. We dark elves must do all we can for these two benefactors.”

“Yeah, you have a point.”

“Yes!”

Robthor and Sur both nodded. Wodan smiled at them with satisfaction.

“I must do my best so that I might hold Aisha and my son-in-law’s child in my arms one day.”

“By the same token, I can’t die until I see Velza married to Sir Hal.”

“And I, until the daughter my wife left me grows to maturity.”

These three were the top warriors of the God-Protected Forest, but they were also doting fathers.

The other dark elves watched them with wry smiles as they carried on.



Meanwhile, Kasen, the Crossbow of the Tiger, who had gone out scouting like Gaten, also found himself beguiled.

The mountain road was somewhat precarious, but he’d sent out a unit of scouts, knowing the leaping cavalry on their temsbocks could still traverse it, and they’d discovered an enemy fortress. It was out in the open in an area where trees were scarce, along a mountain road. It was normal for castles and fortresses to be built along major thoroughfares, so he’d never expected one here, much less one that wasn’t in use.

Furthermore, it'd be hard for them to resupply using these rough roads, and securing a water supply wouldn't be easy either. That meant the Kingdom of Friedonia had set up a fortress in a clearly difficult-to-defend place in order to keep anyone from coming through.

Kasen found this strange when he heard the report, and so he decided to head out and see for himself. When he reached the site, there was, in fact, a fortress there. Stone block walls towered over a lonely bit of the mountain with little foliage. The blocks were weathered, like a ruin from a fallen civilization, but atop the walls were Friedonian flags, which seemed to have been placed there recently.

The Kingdom is really deployed here?! he thought.

There was no point in defending this place if the enemy didn't come through, and even if they were defending it, a little fort like that wouldn't hold out long once it was surrounded by a thousand or so men. It looked like a waste of men and matériel.

Or have they simply raised their flag there to confuse us? Maybe I ought to get a little closer and look.

Just as Kasen was preparing to have his unit advance...

Boom! Ka-boom!!!

There was the sound of an explosion from the fortress, and a moment later a pillar of fire and smoke rose up between there and Kasen's group. The sudden burst of light and noise made them freeze up for a moment, but they quickly realized they were being bombarded.

Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

Before Kasen and his men could do anything, the shells fell one after another. The pillars of fire and smoke were still a ways off, but they grew closer and closer as the enemy corrected their aim.

Firepowder weapons at a meaningless fortress like this?! Is the Kingdom insane?!

Up until now, the Great Tiger Kingdom hadn't encountered any meaningful

resistance. The towns and cities along their route had been either empty shells or surrendered quickly. These were places that seemed easy to defend and strategically valuable, yet the Kingdom had passed up defending them to reinforce this fort in the middle of nowhere? It defied all logic.

“Yahhhhhh!!!”

A battle cry rose up from the soldiers in the fortress. It sounded like there were a sizable number of people there.

Something suspicious is going on here... But it'd be a bad idea to push in too deeply.

Deciding it would be folly to lose men fighting over such an unimportant place, Kasen immediately ordered a withdrawal to seek Hashim's advice. On hearing the report, Hashim suspected deception of some sort based on the strategic meaninglessness of defending such a fortress. But he decided that figuring out the enemy's trick would cost them time they didn't have. He gave up on using that difficult mountain road and settled for posting soldiers at the road's entrance to guard it instead.

As Kasen and his detachment of the Great Tiger Empire's army pulled back, there were just two people standing atop the fortress walls to watch them go. One looked like a hero, wearing a silver mask with a circlet and amulet, along with a red scarf around his neck. The other looked like an evil emperor, with thick armor, a black cape, and a bony helmet.

The former was the protagonist of a beloved tokusatsu program known throughout the Kingdom of Friedonia (and even in some other countries), Overman Silvan. The latter was his rival, the Great Evil Ogre Emperor, Akki Taitei. They fought intense, sometimes comical, battles on the program, but now they were watching the Great Tiger Empire's forces retreat with sober looks on their faces.

“It would seem the enemy has withdrawn, Akki Taitei,” Silvan said, and the Great Evil Ogre Emperor let out a wizened laugh.

“Heh heh heh... Ha ha ha! Ah hah hah hah hah! The imbeciles!” Akki Taitei exclaimed. “They've fallen for our trick! They danced a merry jig, all to our tune.”

“I haven’t fought alongside you like this since Miss Dran ran amok.”

“Hmm. It galls me to work alongside you, my hated enemy, but conquering this nation is a job for Akki Taitei and the Black Group. I won’t let a bunch of Johnny-come-latelies do as they please.”

“It galls me every bit as much... But for the sake of the children’s smiles, the invaders must be repelled. I’ll join hands with anyone, even the devil, for that cause!”

“Ah hah hah hah! Well said, Silvan! I’ll settle my score with you when this battle is done!”

As the two of them were talking...

Siena Juniro, a woman in her early twenties, poked her head out to ask. “Um, Brother, Father, what are you acting like that for?”

This was the younger sister of Silvan’s pre-transformation form and suit actor, Ivan Juniro, and the daughter of Akki Taitei’s suit actor, Moltov Juniro. Hearing her call out to them, Ivan and Moltov, who had been getting totally into character, awkwardly removed their masks.

“Well, when we’re in costume, we just can’t help but get in character... Right, Dad?”

“Y-Yeah. I always get so worked up for some reason.”

Siena gave them a cold glance for their excuses. “Why are you dressed up in costumes to begin with? His Majesty only commanded us to use our family’s illusion magic to confuse the enemy, right?”

Indeed. The explosions Kasen and his men had just seen and the battle cries of the soldiers were all the project of Ivan, Moltov, and Siena’s illusion magic. With the way magic functioned beginning to be worked out, it was discovered that their magic worked by projecting images and memories into the air. The Juniro family had been using this magic to help with special effects on the broadcast programs.

Now, they’d been ordered to put those skills to use in order to block off one of the side routes that the Great Tiger Empire could have otherwise used.

They'd washed the moss from this long-disused fortress, raised flags to make it appear as though it were in active use, and then made it look like there were a large number of defenders using their illusion magic.

This land was hard to defend, but it would still pose a problem if the enemy passed through to the other side. The decision had been made by Hakuya and Julius to block it off with the Juniros' magic. If the Great Tiger Empire thought there were defenders here, they probably wouldn't push their luck trying to get past, and even if they did, the three people here could easily hide. If the enemy decided to pass, assuming the fortress was empty, then they could use their illusion magic to make them think an enemy had appeared behind them. It would only take these three people to slow down and confuse the enemy.

"But the operation didn't call for you to play Silvan."

Ivan and Moltov looked at each other awkwardly.

"Well, you know, the costumes help us psych ourselves up. Right?"

"Y-Yeah. His Majesty said, 'A mental image is important for strengthening magic.' By getting into character like this, we're able to produce more powerful illusions."

"Tell me how you really feel..."

""We let ourselves get carried away!""

Siena's cold eyes forced a confession from her brother and father.

"Well... I understand how you feel." She let out a sigh. "We all have our uncertainties about the war. It's normal to want to cling to heroes in times like this."

"Right. We haven't been invaded like this since the war with the Principality of Amidonia," Moltov said with a sober expression. "I think there's enough justice, evil, and fighting on our broadcast programs. But with the war going on, we can't use the jewels to make them. War in the real world is boring, depressing, and terrible, so I want it to hurry up and end already."

"Dad!"

"Father..."

With that, Moltov donned the helmet of Akki Taitei once more.

“The Great Evil Ogre Emperor is enough evil for one world! Ah hah hah hah!”

Ivan and Siena smiled as Akki Taitei let out a booming laugh.



While the Great Tiger Empire’s detached forces were eventually forced to retreat, their main force continued its advance towards Parnam. However, the cities along the invasion route were either vacant or immediately surrendered, so they met no meaningful resistance and were able to secure their supply lines. This seemingly uneventful march towards the Friedonian capital didn’t go unnoticed by Fuuga and Hashim.

“I’ve gotta wonder what Souma’s thinking,” Fuuga said to Hashim, riding on Durga’s back alongside his advancing forces. Hashim was on horseback beside him, with Mutsumi on his opposite side.

“Souma is plotting something, and whatever it is, time is on their side. Yet, although they interfere with our detachments, the main force has met no delays whatsoever. We are heading towards Parnam without losing any of our combat potential. If we were to plunge in without considering our opponent’s plan, we could likely reach Parnam in less than a day.”

Their rate of movement was steady, but the Great Tiger Empire couldn’t utilize their mobility. The Kingdom of Friedonia had many schemers like Hakuya, Julius, and Excel, so there was the risk that any lapse in wariness could quickly turn the tables. Looking at the variety of ways their detached forces had been stymied, the moment they let their guards down, their supply lines might be cut, leaving them isolated in the middle of enemy territory with a large army to support. This was why the Great Tiger Empire was forced to advance at a rate that they could maintain their speed without compromising themselves. Repeated raids along their route would’ve stifled their march, yet Souma didn’t do it.

“Don’t they want to buy time?” Fuuga wondered aloud.

“I’m sure they do,” Hashim answered, “but perhaps they’re being selective about where they do it?”

Mutsumi cocked her head, asking, “What do you mean, ‘being selective’?”

“They could delay us by defending the cities along our route until they fall or launching sporadic small-scale attacks, but it would increase the Kingdom’s losses. If he can focus his strength on a well-prepared battlefield and meet us there, while still buying just as much time, that is what Souma will choose to do.”

“So he seeks to minimize the damage to his people?”

“That is part of it, yes. But it’s also a logical decision when you consider what will come after the war. If he’s confident they’ll prevail, then no matter how many cities we take, he’ll be able to get them back. It’s likely a decision to preserve people’s lives, which cannot be regained in any way once they are taken.”

“But then...” Mutsumi trailed off.

“That means the enemy’s sure he’s gonna beat us. *Scary*,” Fuuga finished for her.

For something he said was scary, he sounded like he was enjoying it. Fuuga seemed like a child wondering what he’d be getting for Christmas. He looked forward to seeing what this enemy had in store for him.

“Ahem.” Hashim loudly cleared his throat. “However, I would not expect the next place we attack to go this way. Unlike everywhere else we’ve been so far, you cannot say that losing *this* city would be no harm to the Kingdom.”

“‘Red Dragon City,’ right?”

“Indeed. It serves as the shield that defends Parnam from the north, and is the residence of the former General of the Air Force, Castor Vargas. It is also where they have trained the wyvern cavalry, so losing the place where all that know-how is concentrated would be a painful blow for the Kingdom. It is a hardened fortress built into the mountainside, making it advantageous to defend, so...perhaps we were allowed to come this far in order to stall us here?”

Fuuga crossed his arms and groaned. “But Souma already took that fortress city once himself, didn’t he? Back during Georg and Castor’s rebellion, if I’m

remembering right.”

“Yes. However, based on the information I’ve gathered, there were only a few hundred defenders at the time, and no proper battle of defense was ever fought. Souma’s side used a battleship on land to bombard the city and launched a sneak attack through the castle’s secret passages. I believe it is more correct to say that he took the city by *subterfuge*, not a direct assault.”

“I get you. So we probably can’t do the same.”

“This time, they will have enough defenders, and I am sure they’ve sealed up whatever secret passages there were.”

“Which means we’re finally gonna get a real fight.”

Fuuga enthusiastically shouldered Zanganto. Hashim gave him a cold look.

“I ask that you refrain from charging in at the vanguard. We have no way of knowing when the enemy might use that weapon which seals magic.”

“You wouldn’t want them to use it when you’re flying on Durga’s back, leaving you to fall to your death...right?” Mutsumi cautioned him.

“I don’t want to go out like that,” Fuuga replied with a scowl. Hashim nodded.

“This massive army is contingent on your existence, Your Majesty. If you were ever seriously wounded, it would all crumble instantly. While we’re unsure what schemes the enemy has in store, the only time we can deploy you into combat—”

“...Is when we’re so cornered there’s no other way out, yeah? I get it.” Fuuga let out a raucous laugh. It was almost like he hoped Souma might put them in a position in which he’d be dragged onto the battlefield.

Hashim and Mutsumi shrugged their shoulders in exasperation.

The Great Tiger Empire of Haan was said to be able to field about four hundred thousand men. This was the total sum, including the forces of the former Union of Eastern Nations, half of the former Gran Chaos Empire and their two vassal states, the Zemish mercenaries who sided with them and conscripts from that country, and the refugee soldiers and fortune seekers who

had volunteered to serve under Fuuga. (The Orthodox Papal State was an independent country, so their numbers were excluded.)

Aside from the forces staring down the Euphoria Kingdom in the west, those warding off attacks by the Republic in the south, as well as the few hundred who went with Lombard to support and monitor the Orthodox Papal State, plus the few left to guard the homeland...only about two hundred thousand, half their total, were deployed to the war with the Kingdom of Friedonia.

The defending Friedonians had a hundred and fifty or sixty thousand men. However, they had to send forty thousand of those to the Amidonia Region to respond to the Orthodox Papal State, and their vaunted naval fleet couldn't be used in a battle this far inland, so it'd been predicted that they could only field a hundred thousand men against Fuuga.

The soldiers of the ever-victorious Great Tiger Kingdom were optimistic that they could win with a two-to-one advantage, but the higher-ups were cognizant that they *only* had twice as many men as their opponent. Even if there was a gap in the number of troops available, the Kingdom of Friedonia had far more national power and technological development. They were a wily opponent that'd used a bizarre weapon that rendered magic unusable during the war with the former Gran Chaos Empire, and yet, the Great Tiger Empire had to send their second-best commander, Shuukin, and the fierce Moumei to prepare against the Euphoria Kingdom and the Republic.

It was thought their opponent's knowledge would make a hard battle inevitable.

Meanwhile, in the Kingdom of Friedonia, people were intimidated but not panicked by the number of troops in the Great Tiger Empire's armies. This was thanks to the Kingdom's news program constantly reporting on the movements of the Great Tiger Kingdom. The information was precise, as if the viewer were watching them from the air, and served to guide evacuations. Those broadcasts could even be watched in cities already seized by the Great Tiger Empire if the viewer had a simple receiver. It seemed as though the Kingdom was only broadcasting information that they didn't care if their opponents saw, but Hashim was still surprised at the precision of it. He sent out Krahe and the griffon riders, thinking that it might be because there were wyvern cavalry

scouts observing them, but they came up empty.

How could the Kingdom track the Great Tiger Empire's movements so closely? The answer was at an altitude higher than wyverns or griffons flew.

"Hmm... It seems the Great Tiger Empire will close in on Red Dragon City soon. There isn't any sign of them having lost troops, so our attempts to interfere with their detached forces must be going well," Serina murmured as she leaned out of the gondola to look down with a telescope.

After observing a bit more, she retreated back into the gondola.

Turning to her fellow passenger, Komain, she said, "There's no change to their course. The vanguard units will arrive at Red Dragon City shortly. Send word to Parnam Castle and Red Dragon City."

"Got it... Off you go now." Komain quickly jotted down what Serina had told her, then released messenger kuis to carry the messages to their recipients.

These messenger kuis had been trained for high-altitude deployment and glided towards the ground at an angle. This was so high that wyverns couldn't fly, so they would drop to a more appropriate altitude before opening their wings and continuing to their respective destinations.

With their job done, Serina and Komain shut the windows, which were letting in a chilly breeze due to the high altitude. Why were Poncho's wives doing this?

"Are you enjoying your flight, ladies? Over," came a voice from the communication tube. (Although, in this case, it was more like a tin can telephone.)

"Yes," Serina replied. "We're enjoying an elegant trip through the air, Lady Sill. Over."

"Ha ha ha, I'm glad to hear it!"

The voice belonged to Queen Sill of the Nohung Dragon Knight Kingdom. Her partner, Pai the White Dragon, was the one carrying this gondola.

"You know," Sill said, "our country is completely surrounded by the Great Tiger Empire these days. It makes it hard for the merchants to come and is putting a strain on our supplies. It's a good thing we opened trade routes with

the Kingdom. Over.”

“Hee hee. Well, Venetino is the center of the Kingdom’s trade network, and our husband and children are all such big eaters, after all, so we have a lot of food on hand. I’m sure we’ll have something that suits your tastes. Over.”

“Yes. We were able to receive many quality items. And you were kind enough to give us a hefty discount if we brought some ‘sightseers’ when we delivered the goods back to our own country. Over.”

And with that, the candid conversation concluded.

“Indeed. I’m told that the three-eyed race is quite big on sightseeing, so I’m sure they’re quite pleased with the arrangement.”

Komain, who was listening beside Serina, had an awkward look on her face like she didn’t know how to react.

“Um... What was that about?” she asked. “You both sounded so conniving.”

“Hee hee. It’s important for people and nations to keep up appearances,” Serina replied with a smile like the one she wore when teasing Carla.

In short, the ones observing Fuuga’s forces were Serina and Komain, as well as members of the three-eyed race, to which Doctor Hilde belonged. They’d boarded a gondola carrying supplies from Venetino to the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom and reported back to Souma and the others on what they saw the Great Tiger Empire doing down below, providing accurate information for the news program.

The Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom needed to remain uninvolved in wars between other nations. However, there was no rule forbidding them from taking passengers along while shipping supplies back to their own country. Serina and Komain were both noncombatants, and the supplies were not military in nature. As for the members of the three-eyed race, they were just people who happened to have really good vision.

No matter what they happened to see during the trip or whom they reported it to, that was none of the dragon knights’ concern. They wouldn’t get involved in wars between other countries, but they couldn’t be held responsible for what their *passengers* might do.

“I don’t know that the argument holds water, but...we are at war, after all,” Komain said with a pensive look.

Serina stopped smiling and nodded. “We’re doing this so that we can go back to a happy dinner table with our husband, Marin, and Maron. Let’s help His Majesty dispense with this pointless conflict swiftly.”

“Agreed... I want to get back to our husband and the children quickly.”

The two nodded in agreement.



The messenger kui sent by Komain landed in Red Dragon City. It was received by the former steward of the House of Vargas, Tolman, who was now the leader of the National Air Defense Force. He turned to look at the person behind him.

“It seems Fuuga’s forces will be here soon.”

“Oh, I-I see...”

The one who answered him, his voice shrill with tension, was the present head of the House of Vargas, Carl Vargas.



Chapter 9: A Heated Battle! The Red Dragon City

Front

“It’s finally beginning,” Carl said with a gulp.

The boy looked like he couldn’t be more than twelve or so, but he was doing all he could to stand up in the face of the fear and pressure of war.

As was apparent with Aisha and Naden, the long-lived races’ emotional age was somewhat tied to the age they looked. Born to two dragonewts, who lived even longer than the elven races, Carl’s physical and mental development was slower, and he still appeared as a child.

Regardless, now that he had become the head of the House of Vargas in place of his father and elder sister, he could not act like a scared, panicked little boy. Tolman knew that, so he continued as if he didn’t notice how tense he was.

“Yes. His Majesty’s orders are to defend Red Dragon City to the death. We were able to arrange a suitable environment for raising wyverns here with Lady Tomoe’s advice; it greatly raised the combat potential of the National Air Defense Force. It will be a great loss to the kingdom should this place be taken or destroyed. We also cannot simply allow the enemy to pass by. We must either buy time until His Majesty’s preparations are complete or draw away part of the enemy force.”

“I know that... It’s why His Majesty sent half the Air Force and thirty thousand soldiers here.”

His elder sister, Carla, was a hot-blooded commander like his father, Castor, but Carl took after his serious and quiet mother, Accela. He might have lacked the aura of command his father and sister possessed, but his earnest, straightforward personality was well regarded by Souma, the other elites of the country, and the people of his domain. He had supported the House of Vargas through tough times when a deft hand was needed at the helm. However, open conflict changed things.

This was the first war Carl, who was not fond of violence, would face as the head of the house. It wasn't just a skirmish either. He was on the front line of a great war that had embroiled the whole world. It was only natural that his insecurity felt like it was crushing him.

Just as he was hanging his head, looking like his heart might break...

"You're a commander now. Keep your head high, Carl!" a voice shouted.

"Ah—" Carl stood up straight at this rebuke.

Two people strode towards him—with dragon wings, horns, and tails emblematic of dragonewts, and the same red hair as his own.



“Father! Sister!” Carl cried out with glee.

It was Castor and Carla, both of whom were supposed to have been thrown out of the House of Vargas.

The House of Vargas had garnered sympathy as the true reasons for Georg Carmine’s rebellion came to light. Castor’s achievements in the kaiju hunt in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago and Carla’s defense of Souma in the battle with the Seadians had finally made it possible for them to return. However, in order to take proper responsibility for their past actions and because they had both found worthwhile jobs—Castor as the captain of the carrier *Hiryuu* and Carla as caretaker of the princes and princesses—neither had tried to return before now.

But with both the Kingdom and Red Dragon City in crisis, Souma had ordered them to return to Red Dragon City.

“Sorry, Carl,” Carla said with a smile. “We’ve kept you waiting, huh?”

“Sniff... Yes! I’ve been waiting for you, Sister!” Carl responded energetically, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve.

For Carl, who had been struggling with uncertainty, their return was more reassuring than the arrival of ten thousand soldiers.

Castor went over to talk to Tolman. “I’ve caused a lot of trouble for you too, Tolman. Thank you for looking after Carl.”

“Think nothing of it, Master... No, I suppose I am to call you ‘Captain’ now?”

“Yeah. Carl is the current head of our house.”

“Well then, Captain. Although it might not have felt long to someone as long-lived as you, as far as I’m concerned, we’ve worked together for a long time. As one used to being dragged around by your whims, looking after your earnest son has been no trouble whatsoever.”

“Harsh words right out the gate, huh? I ought to have expected that from my former steward,” Castor said with a wry smile.

“Father,” Carl called out as he approached. “Since you’ve returned, can I leave command of our forces to you?”

Carl sounded hopeful, but Castor shook his head.

“No. Carla and I both came here as combatants. As the head of the house now, you must do your best with Tolman’s support. I’ll support you too, of course.”

“O-Oh, no...”

Carl didn’t know what to say after being rebuffed. Carla clapped her hands down on his shoulders.

“Don’t look like that. No one is asking you to be a perfect commander all on your own. Father and I have both failed. We almost destroyed this house with our hardheadedness.”

“Sister...”

“Look at the battle with your own eyes. If you find your own abilities lacking, learn from others. If you can’t fight yourself, encourage the troops and be with them in your heart. If you do your best, someone will see that and support you.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’ll make a better lord than I was,” Castor said, to which Carla nodded.

““The longer you walk, the more hands there will be to support you,”” she said, quoting a lullaby from this world.

It was the same one that Juna sang to Souma during his first year when he was about to be crushed under all the exhaustion and pressure.

Carl raised his head. “Yes! I’ll do my best!”

His still-childlike face was full of determination. Castor, Carla, and Tolman all nodded with satisfaction.

“Oh, my. You all look like you’re having fun,” said a voice.

Someone new strode over to join them. This woman also had the traits of a dragonewt, with a single horn on her forehead, dragon wings on her back, and a tail, but her hair and scales were blue. She donned a marine uniform similar to Juna’s, with a rapier on her hip.

Before them stood Accela, the child of Excel and her (now deceased) partner, Castor's wife, and the mother of Carla and Carl.

"Wait, Accela?! What are you doing dressed like that?!" Castor asked, eyes wide with surprise.

She had a comely face that resembled Excel's but was known for being a quiet beauty, not conniving like her mother. And yet, here she was in full combat uniform. Carla, Carl, and Tolman were speechless.

"W-Wait... You're not going to fight, are you?!" Castor asked.

"Oh, my." Accela smiled. "Have you forgotten just whose daughter I am?"

"Duchess Walter's, obviously."

"Yes. And I led the Marines under her command *before* I married you."

This was the point where Castor finally remembered. Half a century had passed since they were wed, so he'd forgotten until just now, but Accela had been a commander of the Marines like Juna. After getting married, she told Castor, "I want to spend some time away from the battlefield to be with our children as a mother," and had been living the life of a fine lady ever since, but she had originally been a soldier. Perhaps Carla's bloodthirsty personality (which had largely been tamed through Serina's training) wasn't entirely Castor's fault.

Accela spun around and showed off for them. "It's been a while since I've put this on. I'm relieved it still fits."

"Of course it does. Your figure hasn't changed in the last fifty years..."

"What do you think, Carla, Carl? Does it suit me?"

When she asked the children their thoughts...

"Don't ask questions we don't want to answer! It's embarrassing!"

"M-Motheer..."

Carla and Carl were both as awkward as they'd be listening to the story of how their parents first met. Tolman, meanwhile, was averting his eyes and trying to avoid getting caught up in it. Despite all this, Castor somehow

managed to recover and turned to Accela with a stern expression.

“I’ll ask once more. Are you planning to fight?”

“Yes, Castor. I won’t let you leave me out of it any longer,” she said, smiling. But her eyes told a different story. “Back then, I went to my mother’s side, hoping to at least protect Carl, but what I really wanted was to fight by your side. I never want to be put in a position where I have to watch from a distance as my husband and daughter fight for their lives again. This time, I will protect the house and my family.”

“Accela...”

Her words were full of conviction. Carl was almost moved by them, but then...Accela grinned and clapped her hands.

“I had my mother send a whole load of cannons and cannonballs for such an occasion. I’ve made a bunch of other preparations too, so let’s all put them to good use.”

Accela said this with the same tone as someone saying, “My folks back home sent us some apples, so let’s all eat them together.” Everyone was made aware that this woman was unquestionably Excel’s daughter.

“Uh, our liege said that we don’t have to push things,” Castor advised, “we can just play for time...”

“Now that the whole family’s together, we should celebrate that with a bang!”

“Don’t say dangerous things so casually! Are you enjoying this?! You are, aren’t you?!”

Accela was acting playful—as playful as explosives can be, that is—while Castor was being dragged around at her whim.

As Carla and Carl watched their parents carry on like this, Carl said, “Sister... Their blood runs in my veins, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah... Just like it runs in mine.”

“Mm-hmm... I’m starting to feel like I can give it my all.”

“That’s exactly how a man of the House of Vargas should be...is what I ought to say, I guess?”

They both had incredibly awkward looks on their faces.



Around the same time, Liscia murmured, “I wonder if Carla and her folks are all right...”

Currently, it was just her, me, and Julius in Parnam Castle’s war room.

The first serious battle against the Great Tiger Empire was about to take place at Red Dragon City. The Republic was doing well holding off the Great Tiger Empire on their front, with the Euphoria Kingdom in a staredown of their own, and the Orthodox Papal State had already been driven back on the Amidonian front.

Our comrades were doing their best all over the continent. In order not to waste their efforts, we couldn’t let the enemy tear through us.

“There shouldn’t be an issue,” Julius said, pointing to Red Dragon City on the map laid out in front of us. “Red Dragon City is a hardened fortress. With ten thousand defenders, they can hold out for months without resupply. And with their former masters, Sir Castor and Madam Carla, also present, morale inside the castle must be high. Even the Great Tiger Empire will struggle to take the city.”

Though Julius said this, Liscia only looked more concerned.

“But if they’re going to handle Fuuga and that flying tiger of his, only Halbert and Ruby or Naden and Aisha can do it, right? All four of them are defending Parnam. I know Carla’s out there, but can the wyvern cavalry handle Fuuga or Krahe and his griffon cavalry?”

“We’ve set things up so they can,” I said, looking at Liscia straight on. “They have the men, equipment, and supplies. I’ve prepared some secret plans for them too. If Fuuga puts in an appearance himself, they’ll have to trigger the magic canceler and hide inside the castle, but Fuuga and his men shouldn’t be able to handle them either. If he sticks around there, obsessed with taking Red Dragon City, he’ll be doing just what we want him to.”

“I concur. If I were on the enemy’s side, rather than go after a troublesome castle like that, I would leave some soldiers to keep them under control and press on to Parnam. Because that’s what we don’t want them to do.”

Liscia nodded at what Julius was saying. “You’re right... We’re going to have enough trouble on our hands here soon, so we’ll just have to trust in them and wait.”

“Yeah. Once they pass Red Dragon City, there are no more cities to act as a breakwater between there and Parnam. Fuuga and his men will arrive in no time. We need to finish up our preparations to meet them.”

I noticed a somewhat complicated expression on Julius’s face. I asked, “Is something the matter?”

“No... It’s nothing...” Julius simply shook his head quietly at the question.



Meanwhile, at the Great Tiger Empire camp in the mountains surrounding Red Dragon City...

“First, we’ll need to engage in a brief skirmish in order to gauge our opponent’s will to fight,” Hashim said.

Gathered with him were Fuuga and Mutsumi, as well as Gaten, Kasen, Gaifuku, Krahe, and the influential commanders from the lands they’d absorbed.

“The enemy has holed up inside the castle of General Castor. This is a key city for the Kingdom of Friedonia to train their wyvern cavalry, so they won’t readily abandon it as they have the others before now. I expect they have a considerable number of wyvern knights here. If we try to assault the castle, the Air Force will unquestionably come out to meet us.”

“Then let my griffon cavalry handle the task!” Krahe stood up, thumping his chest with one hand. “The griffon riders are faster than wyvern riders, and we can execute tighter turns. We are the blades of the air, feared by other nations since the time we served under the Gran Chaos Empire. I might not speak so boldly if we were against the Dragon Knight Kingdom, but there isn’t even the slightest chance that the Kingdom of Friedonia could defeat us!”

Krahe sounded confident, but Fuuga looked at him dubiously, resting his cheek in the palm of one hand.

“You talk big, but I doubt it’ll be that easy. They know you’ve joined us, so I figure the Kingdom will have taken measures against griffons, don’t you think?”

“No matter what schemes our opponent has dreamed up, my squadron, the blades trained under Saint Maria and offered to the great Fuuga, will cut them to pieces. In our last battle, they used that accursed tool (the magic canceler) against us, making it so we couldn’t even fly, but it also places them in the same predicament. I cannot see them using a weapon that renders their own air force ineffective, so the winner will be decided solely by which of us is stronger.”

Krahe was bursting with confidence. Historically, it was true that the griffon cavalry had been superior to wyvern cavalry, and Souma had been wary of them after the war with the Principality of Amidonia. Also, even if the enemy used the magic canceler, griffons had wings, unlike Durga, so they could glide down to the surface.

Fuuga seemed to think for a moment...then nodded. “Well, you might as well try. Go for it.”

“As you command. Victory will be yours, my liege.”

With that, Krahe did an about-face and left.

The young genius, Kasen, looked at Fuuga. “Was that wise? Sir Krahe seems to be taking the enemy lightly...”

“I have to agree with young Kasen,” Gaten added, sharing Kasen’s concern. “That confidence of his is dangerous.”

Fuuga shrugged. “The guy fought as Maria’s blade for years. We won’t be able to fix that pride of his unless he has a hard time. He didn’t even get to fight in our last war with the Kingdom, after all. Only tens of thousands of men holed up in Red Dragon City, nothing against a force of our size. If Krahe wins, then good, and if he doesn’t, then it won’t have much effect. If he wises up and sees Souma and the Kingdom for the threat they are after they make him suffer, that’s fine too.”

“You don’t sound like you think he can win,” Gaten said, earning him a

boisterous laugh from Fuuga.

“The information I got from Yuriga before she married Souma never mentioned the air force. If she could send information about the island carriers but not the air force, then he kept their secrets from her.”

“Which means...they have something in store for us,” Mutsumi concluded.

“Yeah.” Fuuga nodded. “I’m really looking forward to seeing what it is.”

The rest of the group had complicated expressions, unsure whether they should be reassured or worried by how happy Fuuga sounded about this.

“Reporting! Griffon and wyvern cavalry have taken off from the Great Tiger Empire’s forces!” shouted the soldier who had been observing from the watchtower. “A portion of their ground forces have also begun advancing towards Red Dragon City!”

Hearing this, Castor and Carla each jumped into the saddles on the backs of their wyverns.

“Hee hee... You know, this really takes me back, Father,” Carla said with a chuckle. Castor nodded and smiled back at her.

“I know how you feel. I had to stay here and hold down the fort back when we fought against our lord, so it’s been even longer for me.”

“Didn’t you ride when you were on the carrier? You were carrying wyverns, weren’t you?”

“I was always too preoccupied with giving orders. Besides, when I was at sea, captaining a cruiser was more fun than flying on a wyvern.”

“Sounds like you were enjoying life at sea to its fullest...”

It was a bit hard for Carla to accept that. While she had been in the castle, forced into humiliating outfits by Serina, Castor had been living the good life out on the high seas.

Castor laughed. “It’s fun once you get used to it. You should come over and play when this war is over. The whole ship will welcome you.”

“You plan to return to the carrier again after the war?”

“It’s like my home away from home now. I wish I could’ve brought it into this fight. Maybe we could’ve had Mechadra or the rhinosauruses pull it.”

“You know that’s what destroyed the original battleship *Albert*. Also, if you go calling it your home away from home, Carl and Mother will get upset, you know?”

“No...I’m starting to feel that Accela will probably come along with me next time.”

“It looks like Carl’s troubles are going to continue a while longer...”

As the two of them were bantering, the aforementioned Carl himself rushed over with Tolman by his side.

“Father, Sister. You’re heading into battle, I see.”

“Yes, Carl. Leave the skies to us. Tolman, I trust Carl and the soldiers to you.”

“Understood,” Tolman said with a nod reminiscent of his days as a steward.

“Carl...” Carla said, placing a hand on her brother’s head. “You’ve done well protecting the house all this time. That’s how I know we can trust you with Red Dragon City. Make sure we have a home to return to when this is over.”

“Yes! And best of luck to you, Sister!”

Carl watched Carla move away, and Castor shouted to the rest of the wyvern cavalry, “All right, it’s time we head out!”

The air force unit comprised people who’d previously fought under Castor’s command and those who currently served under him aboard the carrier *Hiryuu*. To them, Castor was a reliable commander they could trust.

“As of this moment, there is no longer any need to hide the skills we’ve polished or the technologies we’ve long kept secret! We are going to throw everything we have at the enemy! Let them see that we’re the stars when it comes to the war in the skies!”

““““Yeahhhhhh!”””” Castor’s words were met with throaty cheers.

He raised his right fist up high as he listened to the applause.

“Men! Activate your propulsion devices!”

At Castor’s command, the wyvern riders activated the ring-shaped devices at the back of their mounts’ saddles. These were the light-model Maxwellian Propulsion Devices, also known as the Little Susumu Mark V Light. They’d been developed after the war with the Principality of Amidonia, and they’d yet to see battlefield deployment due to a lack of wars between countries since then. This technology had only really been used by Halbert during the storm in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, but now it would enter combat for the first time.

“Okay, people! Let’s race through the skies as the swords of His Imperial Majesty!” Krahe shouted from his position at the head of the griffon and wyvern cavalry that’d lifted off from the Great Tiger Empire’s camp.

If the enemy had taken flight themselves, then that was a sign that the Kingdom of Friedonia had no intention of using the weapon that nullified magic this time. Krahe concluded they likely planned for a direct confrontation between the two air forces. He also thought that in a battle of air force versus air force, the Great Tiger Empire could score an overwhelming victory.

If wyverns were bombers, then griffons were fighter planes. Unlike wyverns, whose large wings meant it took a long time for them to turn, griffons’ wings were smaller, allowing tighter turns. When the two collided head-on, griffons had the upper hand. However, the griffon’s style of flying meant they tired quickly, so they needed wyvern-riding allies to cover for them.

Also, because the Kingdom of Friedonia still needed to leave behind an air force to defend Parnam, they only had so many wyvern cavalry to deploy here. Krahe, on the other hand, could command almost all of the air forces that the Great Tiger Empire had brought for this invasion into the fight. With an advantage in both quantity and quality, he felt that his victory was inevitable.

“Reporting! The enemy has also sent out their wyvern cavalry!”

Krahe smiled, looking ahead as he listened to the report. “I knew it! The enemy has less than half our numbers!”

The force of wyvern riders lifting off from Red Dragon City was at best forty percent the size of Krahe’s. Now that the enemy was also in the air, the risk of

that magic-sealing weapon being used was completely eliminated, and there was no sign of that red dragon knight he'd considered a threat. Krahe was certain of victory.

"Now, let us show the Friedonians who the stars of these skies are! We will wipe away a paltry force like theirs in no ti—"

"Incoming!!!" one of Krahe's men shouted, cutting Krahe off.

The Kingdom's wyvern cavalry, which had appeared so distant, closed in quickly. By the time Krahe's eyes widened with surprise, they were only a stone's throw away.

"Grr! Intercept the—"

"Too late!"

As Krahe tried to give the order, the Kingdom's wyvern cavalry raced past him at an incredible speed. He didn't even know who'd said that. In contrast to how the Empire's air force was flying in formation, the Kingdom's air force just flew straight at them. They even shot right past without their wyverns unleashing their fiery breath on the Empire's air force.

Speaking strictly in terms of its effect, all they'd done was fly by. It hadn't even been an attack. However, after seeing his enemies fly past at speeds many times beyond what he believed was possible, Krahe's mind froze up, unable to respond. There was also a violent burst of wind as the enemy passed, breaking up the Great Tiger Empire's formation.

"H-Hey! Stay back!"

"Whoa, don't complain to me... Agh!"

"Raise altitude! Do you want to collide?!"

As they lost control of their wyverns and griffons, midair collisions started occurring everywhere, and some men even plummeted to the ground below.

Coming to his senses, Krahe barked orders for his men to calm down. "Urgh! Calm yourselves! Confusion only plays into the enemy's hands!"

"Incoming! Another attack from the left!"

There was another shout from one of the soldiers, and wyvern breath attacks, arrows, and wind magic launched by the enemy hurtled towards them from the left.

Reflexively, Krahe shouted, “Everyone, defend yourselves!”

At his command, the Empire’s air force began performing defensive maneuvers. They countered the breath attacks with their own and blocked or evaded the others, using a variety of methods to endure the assault. However, they weren’t being given even a moment’s respite.

“H-Here they come!” someone shouted.

Then the Kingdom’s wyvern cavalry charged at them again, just as fast as the balls of wyvernfire that’d assaulted them. They boldly flew past the Empire’s air forces once more, breaking up their formation, but this time Krahe could observe his enemies closely.

They have something on the back of their saddles?! I don’t know how it works, but it must be the source of their speed. Do they mean to compensate for their wyvern’s poor ability to make tight turns by specializing towards speed and competing with us using hit-and-run tactics? Grr... How shrewd of them. As he thought this, the Kingdom’s air forces flew off into the distance. Their speed is incredible. Yet, at the same time, that also means that they’ve lost the ability to make tight turns. That’s where we’ll find our chance of victory!

Having found a solution, Krahe shouted, “People! You mustn’t be tricked by the enemy’s movements! They are fast, yes! However, they cannot change direction so quickly! Watch! After just one attack, they’ve flown so far away! They’re fleeing so we cannot attack them during the long time it takes them to turn around!”

Having commanded an air force for as long as he had, Krahe wasted no time figuring out the weaknesses of the propulsion devices.

“There will be time between one charge and the next! Use it to calm yourselves and return to formation! They must approach us to launch an effective attack, so we need only wait and strike them when they do! If we intercept them with minimal movement, it is inevitable that they, who are far fewer in number, must tire before we do!”

““““Yeahhhhhh!””””

Krahe's words were having a calming effect on his men. The Empire's air force held their position, and they kept on facing the Kingdom's air force with the absolute minimum amount of turning necessary as they braced for the attack.

Meanwhile, in the Kingdom's air force...

“Father! The enemy is regaining its composure!”

“Yeah. Looks like they've got some capable people on their side.”

Castor and Carla were talking as their wyverns flew side by side. Castor stroked his chin, a concerned expression on his face, as he considered what to do.

“The plan was to throw them into even greater disarray and seize control of the battle...but it looks like the Great Tiger Empire plans to just sit there and wait for us to come attack.”

“Charging into that would be like riding into prepared pikemen with ordinary cavalry. Maybe our momentum would carry us through, but it would probably hurt.”

Hearing his daughter say this, Castor grinned.

“Yeah. I'm not a fan of pain.”

There was a certain composure to his smile. Turning to look behind him, he shouted to the wyvern riders following them.

“Looks like they've decided that we're not able to turn with these propulsion units, so they're going to wait for us! And normally, they *would* be right!” Castor smiled. “But do you remember what our unit is called, men?!”

““““The Mobile Wyvern Cavalry!!!”””” the soldiers answered without missing a beat.

“What is your attachment?!”

““““The carrier *Hiryuu*!!!””””

“Who trained and led you?!”

““““Captain Castor!!!””””

If Halbert's Dratroopers were the best of the best when it came to ground operations, then the Mobile Wyvern Cavalry were the elites of the air. They had learned from Castor aboard the *Hiryuu* and were trustworthy men he'd eaten with and slept alongside.

Satisfied with their responses, Castor looked at Carla.

"Carla! We're going to do *that*!"

"Huh...?! *That*?" Carla's expression grew a little tense.

"I taught you how, didn't I? Have you practiced?" Castor asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I borrowed one of the castle's wyverns, but this will be my first time trying it in an actual combat situation."

"Ha ha ha! Don't worry. That's the same for all of us."

"That's not reassuring at all! Yeesh..." Even as she said this, Carla steeled herself.

If Castor said they were doing it, then she would. Even after all the time she'd spent away from home, Carla was still proud of her distinguished career in the Air Force. That was why she'd practiced "that technique" when she could find time while still looking after Prince Cian and Princess Kazuha.

Seeing Carla's enthusiasm, Castor raised his voice. "Men, after our next charge, we're using *that*! It's time to show off our talent and grit!"

""""Ohhhhhh!""""

The Kingdom's air force let out a cheer that echoed through the sky. Even the Empire's air force was able to hear it.

"Here they come! Everyone, prepare to strike back!"

Anticipating another charge, the Empire's air force readied their bows and held their blades to strike; their wyverns' mouths were open and ready to meet their attackers with their flaming breath. Their actions seemed to say, *Bring it on*. And that's just what the Kingdom's air force did.

"Fire!"

At Krahe's command, a volley of arrows, magic, and breath attacks flew

towards the Kingdom's air force.

"Wha?!"

However, the attacks all flew underneath the Kingdom's forces.

Unlike in their previous charges, they hadn't just flown straight at the Empire's air force; they'd taken a course that would send them over their opponents' heads, causing the attacks to miss. Krahe clicked his tongue as he looked up at the Kingdom's air force racing past overhead.

"Tch... More trickery. But it will still take time for them to turn. Men, get back in formation before they can turn—"

As he was trying to give that order...

"Yeah, you *would* think that! Do it!"

On Castor's command, Carla and the Kingdom's air force cut the power to their propulsion devices, turning their wyverns' long necks and tails around like a cowboy spinning a lasso. The wyvern's momentum kept them going in the same direction, but they slowed down, with their bodies facing the opposite direction. This maneuver was effectively a midair turn.

It was the same method cats used to turn around and always land on their feet. It wasn't possible to change directions in midair by just twisting their bodies around, but by spinning their necks and tails they could turn their bodies around. Once her wyvern had turned, Carla waited for her momentum to die down and then restarted the propulsion device.

"Ngh!" Her body was put under pressure like nothing she'd ever felt.

She grimaced under the strain but made it through, and soon she was flying at the Empire's air force again. It wasn't just Carla. Castor and the wyvern cavalry were already preparing for another charge at the Empire's air force.

The Mobile Wyvern Cavalry called this maneuver the Castor Turn.

It wasn't impossible to do it with a normal wyvern, but without any means of accelerating in the opposite direction, it would only leave one vulnerable. It even had the risk of falling due to insufficient lift, so no one had tried to fight this way before now. However, with the propulsion devices to provide

acceleration, Castor had secretly been studying this way of fighting aboard his carrier.

The Empire's air force was still trying to get turned around. Their backs were completely exposed to the Kingdom's forces, who had already turned and gotten back up to speed.

"Attack!"

At Castor's command, the Kingdom's air force attacked the Empire from behind.

The units of the air force were generally only able to attack things in front of them, leaving them to flee or dodge any attack that came from the rear. It was hard to fire bows or magic behind them, and wyverns couldn't fire their breath weapons backwards. Because they couldn't turn in place the way units on the ground could, once the enemy was to their rear, all they could do was run and hope to change directions so they could fight back.

"Wha?! From behind us?!"

"Absurd! That's well beyond the wyvern's ability to turn!"

"Urgh! We have to dodge somehow...!"

This attack from the rear sent the Empire's air force into utter disarray. They each scrambled for a solution. Some accelerated as they tried to shake off the enemy while others moved left or right, but that only served to break up their formation and cause collisions that aggravated the chaotic situation. Still, the elite griffon cavalry could evade the Kingdom's wyvern cavalry with minimal movement.

"Calm down! Don't let the enemy's unexpected plans confuse you!" Krahe shouted, trying to get the situation under control, but a burst of wind assaulted him too.

"I see you're the commander! Your head is mine!" Carla shouted. She charged in with her wyvern for a surprise attack.

Riding in at high speed, she swung her sword, hoping to take his head off with one blow. Krahe, however, easily dodged by tilting his griffon to the side.

“Wha?!”

“Fool! Your moves are too straight!”

Krahe imbued the three short swords attached to the back of his saddle with magic and hurled them after Carla, who’d just passed him. The three blades closed in on her from behind, and the hunter quickly became the hunted.

“Urgh! I’m counting on you, wyvern!”

Carla executed another turn like before, knocking down the three incoming blades with her wyvern’s breath attack as she turned. But as she tried to accelerate again, Krahe’s rapier closed in.

“If I can just get her before she accelerates!”

“Damn it!” she grunted. *This guy’s good!*

Just as Carla drew her sword to fight back, fire magic flew down from above Krahe, forcing him to reflexively bring his griffon to a stop. Then a red shadow passed between her and Krahe.

“Huh?!” she gasped.

It was Castor and his red wyvern. Having dropped between the two of them, Castor performed a turn with his propulsion device aimed at the ground, rising up between them again. Now that he had a good look at his two opponents, Krahe finally realized who they must be.

“Dragonewts? Are you from the House of Vargas?”

“Yeah. But now I’m just a dragonewt with no family name,” Castor said.

Carla nodded. “I’m in a similar position, but my desire to protect the House of Vargas is the same as it ever was.”

“There you have it...former General of the Gran Chaos Empire Air Force, Krahe Laval.”

Both Castor and Carla knew about Krahe.

Souma and the others had told them that if there was anybody in the skies they needed to watch out for other than Fuuga Haan himself, it was Krahe. His former boss, Maria, had warned them, “He might be a little conceited and have

a unique sense of aesthetics, but he's definitely a capable commander."

"So the sword of Saint Maria has fallen to become Fuuga's dog, huh?" Castor taunted, making Krahe's eyes flare with anger.

"It was *you* people who sullied my beloved saint! I wanted to see her stand at the forefront of all mankind, carrying our flag! Her meeting with King Souma made her lower herself to being just another woman!"

"How selfish!" Carla spat, angry at the way Krahe talked about it. "You were just forcing your own ideals onto her! Queen Maria is the only one who can decide how she lives her life! And she shines brighter now than when she lived how people wanted her to! Why can't you see that?!"

"Yeah, she's right... Queen Maria's so full of life now." Castor agreed. "Whether she's flying around doing her part to help the weak or getting her hands dirty doing disaster relief, she's always beautiful. Did you know, Krahe? They call her the Angel of the Kingdom now."

"An angel?! Ahhh! I see! I can see it!" Krahe's face shifted from rage to ecstasy. "Because I became her enemy, she regained her radiance! Even after losing her country, her position as empress, and marrying that uninspiring king, she can still retain her glimmer because she can overcome all of those misfortunes! It means that by giving her more to struggle against, I have become to her what the devil is to heaven!"

"What's wrong with this guy? He's crazy." Carla felt sickened by Krahe.

He had his own sense of aesthetics and internal narrative that explained the world in a way that was most convenient for him. People tend to see the world through the lens of their own values, but in his case, he took it way too far. He never stopped to consider if things were really as he saw them.

The way he completely immersed himself in his own narrative was unsettling to everyone else.

"I guess you could say he's pure...in a way."

"Father?"

Carla cast a doubtful look at her father, who showed signs of understanding.

“We were similar to him once,” Castor explained with a wry smile. “Blinded by our pride as warriors and loyalty to King Albert, we caused trouble for a whole lot of people with our stubbornness. Remember?”

“I see what you’re getting at...”

He must have recalled Georg’s rebellion. Carla felt his pain as if it were her own.

“We’re fighting the war your boss started,” Castor said to Krahe. “I don’t know if you’re doing this out of loyalty to him, for friendship, your pride as a warrior, your sense of aesthetics, the future, or whatever... You can come up with all sorts of excuses, but all you’ll see on the ground below is a pile of corpses. If you keep looking away from the harsh reality, you’ll end up hurting what you want to protect.”

His words were full of conviction, but they didn’t reach Krahe.

“Shut up! I will fulfill the role I was given! If it’s to make great people like Lord Fuuga and Lady Maria shine brighter, I’ll gladly dirty my hands!” Krahe shouted.

Castor furrowed his brow. “Your love for your ‘great’ people is so deep that you’ve lost sight of any other values you might have had. Maybe it would have been different for you if you had a family or someone you loved...”

“I said *shut up!*”

Krahe took a swing at Castor, but Castor accelerated and dodged.

“Carla! We’ll combine our attacks so he can’t take advantage of the opening when we need to accelerate!”

“Yes, Father!”

Responding to her father’s call, Carla closed in on Krahe, swinging her blade.

Krahe evaded Carla’s attack and tried to chase after her, but before he could, Castor finished his turn and shot towards him, and Krahe had to dodge the attack. That gave Carla the opening to finish her turn, closing in for another attack, which Krahe parried... This repeated for some time.

Krahe put on an impressive display, continuously warding off the two fierce warriors’ attacks, but he couldn’t do anything else while he did it, and the

Empire's confused air force couldn't recover anymore. This was how their numerically superior air force was suppressed by the Kingdom's much smaller one.

While the great battle in the air was unfolding, the Great Tiger Empire's ground forces were also pressing the attack on Red Dragon City. It was a well-defended city halfway up the mountainside, but the Great Tiger Empire's forces pressed on with sheer numbers and momentum. They were losing in the air, but not so badly that they'd lost control of the skies. On the other hand, the Great Tiger Empire's ground assault reached the walls without being bombed by the Kingdom's air force.

Fuuga, watching his forces from the main camp, turned to Hashim and asked, "So that castle...Red Dragon City, was it? You were telling me that Souma took it before, right?"

"Indeed. It was during the rebellion of the former General of the Army, Georg Carmine," Hashim answered, uninterested. Fuuga crossed his arms and groaned.

"The defenses look tough. How did Souma take it when he's so averse to fighting? You said something about him using a battleship on land, but I don't see it lying anywhere."

Seeing how amused Fuuga was, Mutsumi let out an exasperated sigh.

"No situation ever feels tense when I'm around you, darling. That makes things easier on me though."

"Don't be like that, Mutsumi. I'm bored having to stay in the main camp all the time."

Hashim sighed at Fuuga's touristy attitude.

"Unfortunately, it seems they've already dismantled it. After dragging it here quite forcefully with a team of rhinosauruses, the battleship *Albert* had to be decommissioned."

"What a shame," Fuuga said with a smile.

Meanwhile, around that same time, Carl observed the attack on Red Dragon City.

During the earlier battle between Souma and Castor, he'd been sent to stay with Excel in Lagoon City, so this was the first battlefield he'd ever seen. Carl, still too short to wear the armor a lord like him ought to, was standing on the wall, clad in clothes enhanced with enchantments. Beneath him was the grand army of the Great Tiger Empire, attempting to take Red Dragon City. All those people were here to destroy the House of Vargas and take his head. His knees felt weak with fear, but he still remained standing there as a lord.

"Lord Carl. You could have waited inside the castle," Tolman said to him with a tone of concern.

Carl shook his head. "No. Let me stay here. You might be giving the actual orders, Sir Tolman, but I have a responsibility as lord to see this through. Father, Sister, and even Mother are fighting. The only way that I, who cannot fight, can defend our house is to take responsibility for things."

Even during the time they were labeled as insurrectionist traitors, Carl had remained head of the House of Vargas, supported by Tolman and his mother, Accela. He might have still been little, but he had a lot of fortitude. Watching him, Tolman, the former steward, smiled with satisfaction.

"Do not fear. We won't be letting them do as they please with this house."

With that said, Tolman went to work fighting back against the Great Tiger Empire.

Morale was high as the Great Tiger Empire's land forces attacked Red Dragon City. This army assembled to push to Parnam was now pushing its way up the mountain. They gave it their all to secure Fuuga's hegemony in this war against Souma—it was their last chance for advancement.

Because they knew how formidable the Kingdom of Friedonia was, if they could take Red Dragon City, the war would be as good as won. Once that happened, the other countries of the Maritime Alliance were bound to cease resisting. This meant it was the last chance for the Great Tiger Empire's soldiers to push forward and make a name for themselves. In addition, the fact that they'd seen no appreciable resistance so far, and that the detached forces sent

out had been cleverly defended against had led to frustration among the men. They weren't as fanatical as Krahe, but every last one of them desired to fight alongside the great man Fuuga in a war that would shape the world for future generations.

Despite their high spirits, the main force—including commanders like Kasen and Gaten, who'd been around since the Union of Eastern Nations days—stayed in the rear. The ones at the front were mercenaries, refugee soldiers, and soldiers from the newly joined Kingdom of Meltonia and the effectively nonexistent Frakt Federal Republic. Essentially, they were people who wanted to move up in the world but would be no great loss.

Because time was on Souma's side in this war, if it became apparent that taking Red Dragon City would be too difficult, Fuuga's forces planned to detach some soldiers to keep them in check and then move on towards Parnam. They kept the main force at the rear so as not to exhaust them in a general assault while figuring out the feasibility of taking the city. In place of the best of the best, these attackers were mounds of self-interest, no different from bandits. If they surged into the city, there would be a bloodbath filled with looting, assaults, and massacres.

The defenders desperately resisted in order to prevent that. From atop the city's high walls, they rained arrows and magic down the hill at the climbing imperial forces...

"Unfortunately, there is not much we can offer you," murmured the one-horned, blue-haired dragonewt standing on the walls, looking down at the attackers. It was Accela Vargas, daughter of Excel, wife of Castor, and mother to Carla and Carl. Wearing her navy uniform for the first time in ages, she raised her hand high.

"If there is one thing we *do* have for you, it's this... Commence firing!"

"Yes, ma'am! Commence firing!"

"Commence firing!"

"Commence firing!"

With this naval-style command, the cannons opened fire on the enemies

setting up ladders and sieging weapons or firing bows and magic at the walls.

Pop, pop, pop. Kaboom! Pop, pop, pop. Kaboom! Pop, pop, pop, pop!

The roar of large cannons resounded amid the ceaseless firing of lion-dog cannons. They were raining iron on the heads of the swarming imperial forces.

Bang! Crack!

“Gwagh!”

“Wahhhhh?!”

An amount of cannon fire that was probably excessive for one city rained down on the Great Tiger Empire’s forces. Fist-sized lumps of iron fell along with cannonballs, caving in helmets and skulls as well as destroying ladders and siege equipment. Excel had sent all of the navy’s gunpowder weapons to protect the city where her daughter and her family lived.

However, the Great Tiger Empire’s numbers were overwhelming, and no matter how many died, there was always more swarming to the walls. It was like a zombie horde out of the movies, and the imperial forces came endlessly even as they were crushed by cannon fire. Along the wall, the battle was either even or the defenders were being worn down.

To think the desire to accomplish something while serving under Fuuga would be so strong, Accela thought as she looked down at the situation from the wall. No matter how many of their fellows lie wounded nearby, they are so driven that they pay it no mind. To truly defeat Fuuga Haan, we can’t simply win... So this is what His Majesty meant.

Those entranced by Fuuga’s grand ambition would rise again and again unless Fuuga lost his charismatic appeal. They might win once or twice, but as long as Fuuga’s charisma remained intact, the Great Tiger Empire would not yield. Even if Fuuga himself were to fall here, the fires of resentment would remain inside the people, and the world would continue to be ravaged as these gave birth to his legacy’s successors.

In order to prevent that—in order to completely beat Fuuga and cut off the trouble at its root—Souma was preparing something. And for Red Dragon City, he’d also devised a plan.

It's good we prepared that thing for this. Accela turned to the hooded figures behind her.

"If we are to break our opponents' morale, we must catch them by surprise," she said. "Please, lend me your assistance, both of you."

The two individuals walked over to Accela and revealed themselves.

"You heard her. Looks like we're up, Merumeru."

"Don't call me Merumeru... Well, this *is* why we were called here from the evacuation site in Venetino. It would be a wasted trip if this thing couldn't make an appearance."

The pair who revealed themselves from beneath those hoods were the two heads of the Kingdom's research division now that Taru and Trill had returned home: Genia the Overscientist and Merula the high elf. They'd initially been evacuated to Venetino on Souma's orders but then were recalled to Red Dragon City at Accela's request.

Souma and Ludwin had been opposed to them being on the front lines, but their interest in the proposal and the pair's passion won them over. With Excel arguing Accela's case, Souma had folded and allowed their deployment.

"We're bringing it out," Accela said to them. "Please make preparations."

"Roger," Genia said with her usual casual demeanor. "But we're not the ones who'll actually be moving it."

"Because our job is to remodel it," Merula agreed with a nod. "The actual movement will be done by Sir Souma and Genia's golems. In that sense, couldn't we say she's moving it too?"

"Maybe," said Genia. "Anyway, I'll go ahead and contact His Majesty's consciousness through the golems that are standing by."

Accela nodded.

"Please do. Now, shall we liven up this place even more?" She turned to address a messenger and Genia. "Take a message to the performers with orders to begin playing! Miss Genia, please ask His Majesty to begin moving that thing along with the music!"

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Roger, roger!”

A short while after the messenger took off running, a brave, rousing melody began playing on the walls. The soldiers on the Friedonian side knew the tune. It’d been used in a certain tokusatsu program, and they thought it was probably being used to raise morale.

It had become common knowledge after the Real Song Battle that music could strengthen magic. The soldiers of the Great Tiger Empire, however, did not know this melody. Even if they could surmise that their enemies must be playing it to raise morale, none of them understood the meaning of it.

“Okay, everyone! Let’s all sing along to hype up its appearance!”

Accela raised her hands over her head as though she were a conductor at the front of a marching band.

Immediately, the melody surged, and people began to sing. The noncombatants of Red Dragon City—the elderly, women, and children—were behind the vocals. Within the walls, they stayed hidden inside their own houses, with instructions from Accela to sing when the music played.

As for the tune...

“The Sparkling Dragon of Conquest (Full Armor ver.)” (Lyrics: Souma Kazuya; Music: Juna Doma)

Clad in hunks of warships, its steel body shines.

Call that when you’re in trouble! The guardian of the world has risen!

Pile! (Driver!) Tail! (Drill!) Tearing apart enemies!

Dragon! (Cannon!) Butt! (Bolt Thrower!) Shooting enemies!

The sparkling dragon of conquest, Me-cha-dra!

It was the theme song of the mechanical dragon, Mechadra, that appeared in the tokusatsu program *Overman Silvan*. As if in response to their singing voices,

Mechadra emerged from a forest on the mountainside. However, it had changed since the battle with Ooyamizuchi. With its new steel equipment, the mechanical dragon looked as if it was wearing armor.

That wasn't all. It now had ranged weaponry, including battleship cannons and antiair repeating bolt throwers, all over its body. It really did look like a Full Armor Mechadra, and was akin to an armored battleship. This extra equipment had been made from the remains of the original battleship *Albert*.

Seeing how magnificent it looked, the Kingdom's forces cheered while the Empire's forces were dumbstruck.

Genia giggled to herself as she listened to the singing. "Now that the true nature of this world has been revealed, we've proved the bones used in Mechadra have nothing to do with the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Now we can remodel them as we see fit."

"Not that it makes using remains in a weapon in any better taste," Merula said with an exasperated sigh.

"Well, it's His Majesty's policy to use what he can," Accela said, grinning at this exchange. "So let's have him do his best to save our home with Mechadra."

As if responding to Accela, Mechadra made a gesture as if it were roaring, then began to walk towards the soldiers outside the wall with heaving steps.

"Wh-What is that?!"

"No way! I thought there were no demons!"

"M-Monsterrrrr!"

The sudden appearance of an armored mechanical dragon put the army attacking Red Dragon City into a panic. Just seeing Mechadra was enough to send some of them tumbling down from the ladders they were climbing. They were in disarray despite not even being attacked yet because they remembered the battle they'd fought against the Seadians.

At the northern end of the continent, they'd fought a battle with a gigantic weapon and won a bitter victory with some assistance from the Star Dragon Mountain Range, but their losses had been extensive. They'd worried they

might be swept away in a burst of light. When Mechadra placed its front legs on the ground, the battleship cannons mounted on its back pointed at the Great Tiger Empire's troops.

Boom! Boom!

With that, the cannons began destroying siege equipment, like the battering ram that'd been brought up to the gates. Many soldiers were sent flying in the blasts, only adding to the chaos. The more confused things got, the easier it was to launch attacks from up on the walls, and it became hard to tell which side was attacking. Genia and Merula watched from atop the walls as the imperial forces were pulled this way and that.

"Yep. Looks like it's reloading all right."

"Your golems are the ones firing, yes?"

"That's right." Genia nodded. "Part of His Majesty's consciousness is controlling Mechadra, but reloading, aiming, and firing are all done on my orders."

"We're lucky the enemy fell into a panic. This isn't really all that different from using a battleship on land, is it? Mechadra's not really designed as an antipersonnel weapon, after all."

As Merula pointed out, Mechadra's movements were slow and heavy. That might be good enough when wrestling with a single kaiju, but it only had armor as good as a battleship's. If the imperial forces regained their composure and focused their attacks, it wouldn't last for very long.

"That's true. It's really only a neat gimmick," Genia admitted. "We can't let them take Red Dragon City. But at the same time, if they bypass it and take a route straight to Parnam, we're in trouble. We'd like to hold them here for a number of days, and Mechadra's a convenient way of getting their attention. Hopefully the enemy will think it's going to be a threat to their advance if they decide to leave it alone."

"Will things work out that well?"

In the main camp of the Great Tiger Empire's forces, which Merula was eyeing with concern, Fuuga was smiling with glee. Because Mechadra was so big, he

could see it even at this distance.

“That’s the mechanical dragon Yuriga mentioned! It’s pretty cool!”

“Yes, you would be the type to like such things, darling...” Mutsumi said with dismay.

“Uh-huh,” Fuuga agreed with a nod. “In one of Yuriga’s reports, years ago, she said he used a mechanical dragon to fight a kaiju in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. Was that it? I wonder what makes it move.”

“More importantly, though, is this all right? Your men are falling into disarray,” Mutsumi pointed out.

“Hrmm.” Fuuga stroked his chin. “You know...it’s not as dangerous as that gigantic mushroom thing that was defending the demons...I guess I’m supposed to call them Seadians? Anyway, it’s not firing off the light attacks that thing did.”

“Indeed. I suspect that the weapon we’re seeing poses little threat,” Hashim said before turning to a messenger. “Tell the men at the front that they should not be led astray by its appearance. That dragon can only fire cannons. Tell them that it is something like a siege tower that can be used even on bad terrain, and they are to remain calm and deal with it accordingly.”

After watching the messenger nod and run off towards the front line, Fuuga looked at Hashim.

“So, in your eyes, is it possible to take the city?”

“If we are willing to spend the time and take considerable losses,” Hashim said with a shrug. “However, the more time we spend on this city, the greater Souma’s advantage will grow. That is only more true if, as you have said, Lord Fuuga, he has some scheme in mind.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. So, what now?”

“I think we should leave soldiers to hold them in place and move along immediately. Because that is what Souma least wants us to do.”

“And doing what the enemy hates is how you win on the battlefield, huh?” Fuuga nodded. “Got it. Have the ground forces stop attacking and pull back

right away. And tell the air force to continue keeping the enemy in check, then return if the enemy withdraws.”

“Understood.”

Once Hashim left, Fuuga crossed his arms and looked at Mechadra rampaging off in the distance. There was a look of joy in his eyes...and also one of sadness.

Noticing this, Mutsumi asked, “Is something the matter, dear?”

“Hmm? Nah, I was just thinking how fun it is to see all the stuff that shows up when you go to war with Souma.”

“And yet...you still seem sad?”

“Yeah, it’s fun and all, but...I won’t be able to enjoy this for long,” Fuuga answered with a small smile. “Either it’s my victory or Souma’s. There probably won’t be another big war like this for quite a while. If I win, I can unite the nations of mankind on this continent. If Souma wins, there’ll be a loose federation of states like what he has in the Maritime Alliance. At that point, there won’t be any need for big wars. These times have sent my blood pumping and my heart racing...and they’re coming to an end.”

“Because of what Yuriga told you about...?”

“There’s that too.” Fuuga nodded with a wry smile. “In our last meeting, she put a time limit on my dream, after all.”

“I’m sure Yuriga wanted to stop you...so that you could move on to the next thing,” Mutsumi said. She knew the situation and how both of the siblings felt.

Looking straight ahead, Fuuga said, “Even if she did, I’m just going to keep racing forward. In order to give this era its answer.”

“You’re so awkward.”

“I think so too.”

With that, the Fuuga and Mutsumi drew closer to each other as they watched their own forces retreat.

Chapter 10: Shared Pain

That night, Fuuga spoke in front of his generals.

“We don’t have time to spare taking Red Dragon City,” he said. “There are a lot of real schemers in the Kingdom of Friedonia, and Souma is one of them. If we give them time, there’s a risk they’ll come up with a plan we can’t see through. In order to prevent that, we must tear out his throat faster than expected.”

“So you’re suggesting we leave Red Dragon City alone?” Gaten asked, and Fuuga nodded.

“That’s right. But we’ll leave a force to make sure they don’t hit us from behind... Krahe.”

“Yes, sir!” Krahe stepped forward as he was called.

“You fought the Kingdom’s wyvern cavalry, right? Is it possible to stop them?”

“Yes, sir! The equipment they use to accelerate midair is troublesome, but I suspect it must also put considerable strain on the rider. It seems unsuited to be used for long periods of time. If we hang in there and exhaust our opponents, we might not achieve air superiority, but we can at least prevent an attack from the rear. Please, allow me to take on the task.”

Krahe’s eyes were filled with determination. The way the Kingdom’s air force had played with him that afternoon had stirred up his pride as an air combat specialist.

“Next time, I’ll win for sure,” he added.

Fuuga nodded. “Then we will entrust General Krahe with his aerial unit as well as a force of ten thousand land troops. If the soldiers in Red Dragon City try to give chase, defend us and crush them.”

“Yes, sir! As you command!”

And so it was decided that Krahe would stay at Red Dragon City while Fuuga led the main force to Parnam himself. No cities were left between here and the capital, so the showdown between the two leaders was on the precipice.

Or so he thought, but then something even Souma hadn't anticipated happened...



I was in the governmental affairs office in Parnam Castle, doing desk work again today, like always.

Even in wartime, paperwork never let up. In fact, war created more *necessary* paperwork, and I was having Liscia and Yuriga help me handle what came my way. I'd entrusted matters of strategy and military command to Strategist Julius, Commander-in-Chief Excel, and Ludwin's advisor Kaede, so it wasn't an issue for us to focus on paperwork. But that didn't mean we weren't concerned about the ongoing situation.

Even at this very moment, my people's blood was being shed. I prepared and prepared, trying to make sure nothing I hadn't predicted would occur, but it was nerve-racking to work when I felt this uneasy. Especially now that I didn't have the children to soothe me.

Aisha and Naden rushed into the room.

"Your Majesty. The Great Tiger Empire gave up after attacking Red Dragon City for just one day!" Aisha reported. "They left behind only a small force to keep our forces in check and are now heading towards Parnam!"

"Julius and the others say they're ready to meet them in battle whenever they need to," reported Naden.

They must have gotten messenger kuis from Serina, who was observing from up in the sky.

I laid down my quill and thought, *I see... So Fuuga and his people didn't get fixated on capturing Red Dragon City, huh?*

"This is close to our worst predictions. I thought they would wait and see for at least two or three days," said Liscia.

“They give up too easily,” Naden snorted. “The Great Tiger Empire’s troops have no backbone.”

“No, I think they didn’t want to let you buy time,” Yuriga speculated. “I couldn’t tell you whether that’s because of a suggestion by Advisor Hashim, though, or if it was my brother’s wild instincts.”

It was just me, Liscia, Aisha, Naden, and Yuriga here, which meant that all my wives remaining in the capital were gathered in one place.

“Things are running slow, but...it shouldn’t be too much longer,” I said with a sigh, looking up to the kamidana shrine I had as a decoration in the office. “Mao. How are the preparations?”

“It will still be a little longer.”

“Whoa?!” Yuriga backed away as the image of Mao suddenly appeared in the room and responded.

Liscia and the rest weren’t surprised, but that was probably because of how long they’d been around me. Yuriga had been in this country a long time too, but it was only relatively recently that we could start letting her in on everything, and it’d be some time before she got used to it.

“What’s your overall progress?”

“Around ninety percent. The materials have been gathered, so I believe it should be finished today or tomorrow, but it will take even longer to transport them to each location.”

“We’re really cutting it close...”

My shoulders slumped. I’d wanted to finish it before Fuuga attacked Parnan, but that was looking to be difficult. I asked Mao to continue her work, then asked her to leave (or disappear, rather, since she was a projection).

I leaned back in my office chair and let out a long sigh.

“I wish they’d wasted time a little longer...”

“Red Dragon City is an important location we can’t let fall. We defended it tightly, but maybe we should have asked Carla and the others to fight a more painful battle?” Liscia suggested.

I shook my head. “No. Neither Fuuga nor the Great Tiger Empire is such an easy opponent that we can defend against them while pulling our punches. If we had let down our guards even a little, Red Dragon City would have fallen and horrible things might have happened.”

“You’re right...”

“With the pair of Sir Fuuga and Durga, it might be possible for him to take the castle alone,” Aisha murmured, crossing her arms.

Fuuga’s ability to unleash lightning strikes on the level of a dragon’s, paired with Durga’s high mobility, was a dangerous combination. If a fort wasn’t adequately prepared, he’d easily smash through the gates himself. In order to defend against his wild strength, the defenses had to be super tight and able to make the enemy question if something had happened to Fuuga.

I rose from my chair and spoke to the other four. “Anyway, there isn’t any place where we can defend between Red Dragon City and Parnam. Fuuga and his people will be approaching here in no time. I’m sure Excel is already preparing to meet them in battle, but we should go too.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, sire!”

“Roger that!”

“Okay.”

Liscia and the others all nodded. The time had finally come to face Fuuga head-on. Or so I’d thought...

“What’s the meaning of this?!”

After Fuuga and his men gave up on attacking Red Dragon City early, we received reports they were on their way to Parnam the next day. After hearing one report in particular, I stormed into the war room with Liscia and Aisha in tow.

Julius was there with a grim expression while Excel hid hers behind a fan, and Kaede looked around anxiously.

I strode over to Julius.

“There are no defensible cities between here and Red Dragon City! The only thing left to do was to meet Fuuga in battle near Parnam! That’s why we *agreed* not to leave any troops in the castles and fortresses along the Great Tiger Kingdom’s path!”

“Yes...I suppose we did,” Julius said, his expression unchanged as he nodded.

Now that he’d admitted it, I got up in his face without even trying to hide how livid I was.

“Then why are there units holding their positions?!”

In the report I’d received, there were units still remaining in the abandoned fortresses and evacuated towns along the invasion route.

“Your Majesty... Please calm down,” Excel interjected in a soothing tone.

However, I couldn’t settle down at this point.

“None of those cities or castles can withstand such a massive army!” I exclaimed, seizing Julius by the front of his shirt. “If they hold out there with their meager forces, they’ll just be overwhelmed and crushed by the enemy! You need to recall those units *immediately!*”

“I...” Julius paused. Looking me straight in the eyes, he finished, “...cannot do that.”

I’d given him a royal order. There shouldn’t have been anything strange about it, yet, unbelievably, he was refusing.

I blinked in surprise.

“Why not...?”

“Because they wished for it themselves,” Julius answered, grinding his back teeth.

“Themselves? Who is leading the remaining units?”

“General Owen Jabana and my own grandfather, General Herman Newmann.”

Old Man Owen and Old Man Herman?! They’re only supposed to be

participating in this operation as individual commanders. Why are they defending a place like that?!

I glared at Julius. “You said it was their own will, right? Do you know something, Julius?”

“Yes... They called me aside to speak before this war began.”

With a pained expression, Julius began to recount the story.



“What is it you want to talk about, Grandfather Herman?”

One day, as war with the Great Tiger Empire neared, Julius visited Herman’s domain in the Amidonia Region.

The other day, he’d received a message saying, “I would like you to come to my house without telling His Majesty or Roroa. It isn’t an emergency, but please do come as soon as possible.”

Once Julius arrived at Herman’s manor, the steward led him to the sitting room. Another man—a mountain of rippling muscles—was also present with Herman.

I’ve seen him around the castle before. Souma’s personal trainer, Sir Owen, I believe.

As Julius thought to himself, Herman spoke.

“Good of you to come, Julius. Well, have a seat,” he said, indicating to the sofa across from them.

Despite feeling suspicious, Julius sat down.

“Grandfather. Things are busy right now, but is there something you need? With war about to break out with the Great Tiger Empire, I’m not free at the moment...”

“I know. There’s something I wanted to say about that war.”

“There is?”

Seeing the suspicion on Julius’s face, Herman and Owen both looked at him with warm eyes.

Then, keeping his eyes on Julius, Herman said, “Julius. You’re His Majesty’s strategist now, aren’t you?”

“Hm...? I am. What of it?”

“Then do you understand His Majesty’s weakness?”

Julius mulled over Herman’s words. When asked the question, Julius thought Souma had so many that it was hard to answer. But Herman and Owen were waiting for him to respond, so Julius did.

“If we’re talking about weaknesses... He has no martial abilities and occasionally comes up with off-the-wall strategies but then has to leave the details to his retainers. He doesn’t stand out as a king and can’t talk back to his queens. He has so little fixation on his authority that he lets Halbert and me talk to him casually. When it comes to personal charisma, he not only has less than Fuuga or Queen Maria, he also loses to Head Kuu, Queen Shabon, and Queen Sill too.”

“A rather harsh assessment.”

“But we, his subordinates, are more than able to make up for those shortcomings. The true value of a ruler is not in his own talents but in the quality and number of people serving him. On that singular point, Souma is a ruler who outstrips even Fuuga and Queen Maria.”

Julius’s assessment of Souma was frank at this moment.

In terms of ability, Souma might have strange ideas stemming from another world, but Julius felt he had the advantage over Souma in martial arts and strategy. However, his reign had been short-lived, while Souma’s appeared secure. The way Julius saw it, the main reason for this was because, although there were differences in the respective power of their countries and the situations they’d found themselves in, Souma had been able to hire capable subordinates, evaluate them, and put them to work.

In the Principality of Amidonia, Julius had pushed away his capable sister—Roroa—and his friend Colbert, surrounding himself only with militaristic types, like his father, Gaius, had. That narrowed his field of view, and his reign had collapsed not long after he inherited the seat of sovereign prince. However,

while in the Kingdom of Lastania, he was supported by Tia and her parents, the king and queen, and blessed with trustworthy comrades like Jirukoma and Lauren. By reconciling with Souma and Roroa, he'd been able to protect the country from the demon wave.

The things that Julius had learned through his failures and frustrations were things that Souma had been able to do all along. Julius believed that was what qualified him to be king.

Herman gave Julius's answer a satisfied nod. "I'm sure you're right. As your grandfather, I'm proud you've come to that point of view... But therein lies the trap His Majesty falls into."

"What do you mean by that...?"

"His Majesty is able to hire capable subordinates and trust them to do the tasks he sets them to. In short, that means he's a man who values his subordinates... Too much, sometimes." Herman looked straight at Julius as he continued. "That is His Majesty's greatest weakness. He cannot treat his subordinates like pawns."

Julius gulped. He was as smart as Hakuya; that was why he knew what Herman was getting at and why he had been summoned here alone... Looking at it in light of the country's current situation, he was able to find the answer.

"Sir Julius. You understand it too, right?" said Owen, who had remained silent up until now. "The full details haven't made their way down to us, but we can tell His Majesty, the Black-Robed Prime Minister, Duchess Walter, and yourself have been working on a strategy for war with the Great Tiger Empire. And I know you want to do whatever you can to buy time for that plan."

Julius didn't respond.

"Now, if it's a matter of buying time, there is one way to do it. Have his subordinates fight to the death and risk their lives by buying that time."

"Well, yes, but... That's not what Souma wants!"

"I'm sure it isn't." Owen nodded in agreement. "His Majesty cares for his subordinates. With the high regard people hold him in, if he said, 'Die for the country,' many would, but he's not the type who could say it. It's a likable trait.

However...if he is unable to buy enough time, and the showdown with the Great Tiger Empire comes before his plan is ready, then it might result in even greater sacrifices. And if it does, his subordinates will be the ones to suffer.”

“And so...you two are volunteering to be the sacrificial pawns?”

Julius shook his head. It was out of the question.

“You know that Souma would never allow it,” he told them.

“Of course, we aren’t planning to get permission. We will act at our own discretion based on the situation we see in front of us. The soldiers and subordinates we’ll bring have been carefully chosen and volunteered to come.”

Owen put on a sardonic smile.

“There were more than I expected, you know. This battle with the Great Tiger Empire... It will be a disaster if we lose, but even if we win, many of us old soldiers will no longer have any place to shine. With the Great Tiger Empire removed, nearly all the countries in the world are now our allies. I’m sure His Majesty has thought about what’s to come in the world after this, but we don’t have the stamina or life span left to follow him there. When you get as old as we are, it’s hard to change how you live. So, at the very least, we would like to lay the foundation for young people’s futures.”

“But...”

Julius searched for a counterargument but couldn’t put one into words. He was the better debater, yet these two weren’t speaking with logic but with conviction. He couldn’t think of anything he could say to convince them.

“Grandfather Herman. You’ll make Roroa sad. And Tia too.”

What ended up coming out of Julius’s mouth was a trite appeal to the feelings of their family. The normally stern-faced Herman broke into a smile at that.

“Just hearing you say that, I can go without any regrets.”

“Don’t be silly! Are you fine with that? Making your granddaughters cry?”

“I’m speaking from the heart. I was able to see you and Roroa, the two grandchildren that my daughter left me, reconcile and walk forward together. On top of that, Roroa gave birth to Leon with His Majesty, and you had Tius

with Madam Tia. As a warrior, I never knew when I might drop dead on a battlefield somewhere, yet I lived to see my great-grandchildren. Could there be a more satisfying life than this?”

“His Majesty is like a grandson to me,” Owen said, letting out a boisterous laugh. “Because I’m the one who trained that weakling into a man. The time I saw him ready to pick a fight with some thugs, I was overcome with emotion. So for me, all of His Majesty’s children are my great-grandchildren.”

Owen focused his gaze on Julius.

“Sir Julius,” he continued. “We don’t mean to cast our lives away for nothing. If His Majesty’s plan goes smoothly, we will quietly carry out his orders. However...if we see there are delays and time must be bought, then we will act of our own accord. I wanted you and Duchess Walter to know that.”

“Duchess Walter knows?!”

In light of the fact that word hadn’t made it to Souma or Julius, Excel must have chosen to maintain her silence in case what they were suggesting proved necessary. It was against Souma’s wishes, but Souma was the one who had made this country into a place where they each worked in their own ways, distinct from what he intended, for the betterment of the nation.

Even if Souma got angry later, being able to act on their own initiative was this country’s strength. Julius had no choice but to give up on persuading them, and his shoulders slumped.

“Here are two letters from me,” Herman said. “If anything should happen, give them to His Majesty and Roroa.”

Owen handed him one of his own. “Mine is for His Majesty.”

A pained look washed over Julius’s face, but he eventually accepted the letters and put them in his pocket. He could only hope that there wouldn’t come a time when he had to give them to their recipients.



However, contrary to Julius’s hopes, he gave those letters to me.

With quivering hands, I opened the envelope sealed in wax with the House of

Jabana's crest and pulled out the letter inside. One-third of it was an apology for acting without orders. He also requested that I not blame Julius or Excel, who'd only stayed quiet out of respect for his feelings and shared no responsibility for his actions.

The remaining two-thirds were about his memories with me.

He talked about how he'd enjoyed training me as my personal educator and sounding board; how happy he was to ride the bicycle that Roroa and I used around the courtyard; how thrilled he'd been when my kids called him Grampy Owen... It was a bit all over the place.

Around the time my eyes got so dewy with tears that I couldn't make out the letters anymore, I saw this at the bottom of the letter.

"I think that even if we hadn't rushed into this foolishness, you already had a plan in the works that would beat the Great Tiger Empire. However, a flawless victory is not necessarily the best one. It leads the victors to hubris and leaves darkness in the hearts of the defeated. The knowledge that both sides had losses makes the winner remain cautious and brings comfort to the losers."

He finished with this line:

"Your Majesty... Please, do not forget this pain. It is my last lesson to you."

"Old Man Owen..."



I handed that letter, wrinkled by how tightly I'd held it, to Liscia and Aisha. They covered their mouths once they read it and tried not to be overwhelmed as the tears flowed.

We hadn't read Herman's letter yet. He probably had similar things to say, and I wanted to read it together with Roroa when this battle was over. *Yes. Once the battle is over.*

"Eek?!"

Kaede jumped in surprise as I looked at Julius, Excel, and my advisors... My expression must've been pretty scary. I slapped myself once across the face, and looked straight at Julius and the rest.

"I won't blame anyone right now. Owen and Herman wouldn't want that. But I'm going to give you a piece of my mind! Once this war is won!"

""""Yes, sir!""""

Everyone answered me with a salute.



Along the invasion route towards Parnam, an old fort and a fortress city were burning.

In every city and castle the Great Tiger Empire's forces had come across—with the exception of Red Dragon City—the defenders had either surrendered without meaningful resistance or quickly left. At first, the invaders expected things to be the same with these two, but it was clear that the old fort was an impromptu fortification that had been hastily restored. As for the city, it was small, and the residents had already left.

Once the defenders departed, the Empire's forces should only have needed to leave some troops, and then the main force would have pushed straight on towards the capital. However, after the bulk of the enemy defenders left, a portion stayed behind, shutting themselves up inside the bases. They numbered in the hundreds, so the Empire's forces tried to convince them not to resist in vain, but these remnants were stubborn and refused to listen. Because of that, Fuuga ordered the two bases to be taken by force.

However, since his wild instincts told him there was something unsettling about the two bases, he kept his best troops out of the fight, instead letting the mercenaries and newcomers handle the assault. Everyone assumed the battle would be finished in less than an hour, even if the small enemy force holed themselves up behind these not particularly solid fortifications. But the two bases put up a stubborn resistance.

There was a major difference in morale between the Kingdom's forces, who were quite literally prepared to fight to the last man, and the Empire's, who were confident of their victory but knew if they got hurt here, they'd lose the chance to distinguish themselves in the main battle. As a result, they faced a harder fight than expected, and the Empire's forces were forced to stop acting arrogant and get serious.

Then, just as the imperial forces managed to force their way into the fortress...

Kaboom!!! Both bases went up in a pillar of flames and black smoke almost simultaneously, sending tremors even as far as Fuuga's main camp. The remnants had packed the bases full of explosives, and once they felt that the end had come, they blew themselves up along with the swarming imperial forces.

Fuuga shot to his feet as he saw the sky alight with flames.

"No way! They blew themselves up to take our forces with them?!"

"That certainly does appear to be the case..." Hashim's reply was calm, but the expression was as if he'd just bitten into something unpleasant. "It's rather unexpected...to see the Kingdom using their own soldiers as sacrificial pawns. We will need to make haste in checking that none of the other cities we felled have traps in them."

In preparing for this campaign, Fuuga's camp had thoroughly analyzed the kind of ruler Souma was, along with Fuuga's own view of him as a person. They concluded that Souma would prioritize minimizing casualties and reducing the damage done by the conflict. Moves like throwing away his men as sacrificial pawns, breaking dams to cause floods that also put a burden on his people, and scorched-earth tactics like destroying cities were unlikely from him.

That'd held true until this point along the invasion route, as Souma had kept making choices that preserved the people and their cities. However, now he'd sacrificed his own men and destroyed a city. It was a wild move—one that overturned all their presumptions and forced a reevaluation of the entire strategy.

Fuuga and his people couldn't guess it was Souma's subordinates acting on their own initiative. Once Hashim had hurried out of the main camp to confirm things for himself, Mutsumi approached Fuuga.

"Do you think...this strategy was really Sir Souma's orders?"

"Yeah, no... Probably not. Souma hates this kind of stuff. It was probably the soldiers who stayed behind in these bases making the decisions for themselves."

"So the retainers went and acted on their own, risking their lives without any commands from their ruler?" asked Mutsumi.

Fuuga crossed his arms and nodded.

"Yeah. I think it's a brilliant display of loyalty, and Souma drawing it out of them shows he's doing a good job as king. Probably better than he thinks too."

"I'm sure...he's regretting that right now."

Souma being a good ruler to his retainers had resulted in their deaths. When he heard of this, he would be filled with sadness and regret.

However, for these two, Souma was someone they needed to defeat in order to accomplish their ambitions. They held no personal enmity towards him because he was also looking after Yuriga and Ichiha. Fuuga and Mutsumi felt bad for the suffering that Souma would no doubt go through after this.

Because the Great Tiger Empire was forced to double-check the cities that had submitted to them for any sign of traps, they were delayed for two days.



Fuuga Haan was the favored child of this era.

Perhaps, in the same way that people refer to the period during which Napoleon performed his incredible feats as the "Napoleonic era," this would be

called the “Fuuga Haanic era.” It was a time of dreams and adventure, when one great man’s grand ambition shook the entire continent.

As hinted many times before, the only way to defeat Fuuga—the one protected by this era—was to change the times themselves.

No matter how much he lost to Xiang Ji (Xiang Yu), Liu Bang tried relentlessly until he finally turned things around and emerged victorious. Even though a third of all the battles ended in defeat or a tie, Nobunaga almost managed to unite the country under him.

During times of national crisis, France produced great people like Bertrand du Guesclin, Jeanne d’Arc, and Arthur de Richemont during the Hundred Years’ War. Until the era decides such people have served their purpose, they seem immortal, rising up again and again. That is because the people supporting them want these great people to keep fighting, and will approve of their actions no matter how cruel they may be.

That’s why defeating Fuuga wouldn’t be enough to put out the fire. Even if he was fed a bitter defeat and forced to withdraw, his supporters would still demand a rematch. With their voices pushing him onward, Fuuga would start another world war. That wouldn’t change even if he was cut down in this battle. In fact, that might be an even worse outcome.

With Fuuga dead, leaving only the people enraptured by his ambition, how would they act? First, they would resent me and my country, start a war for revenge, and maybe resort to terrorism or guerrilla tactics. Also, without Fuuga, they couldn’t maintain such a vast domain and would likely fracture into competing states. The northern part of the continent would be laid to waste. Refugees would rush in from the north, and we’d be back to the same place we were when the Demon Lord’s Domain was expanding.

The only way to stop it would be to launch an intervention, but as I already mentioned, they would resent us. A Maritime Alliance intervention would generate resistance, and it would take a long time to subjugate it. For these reasons, in this war, we were pushing forward a plan that would bring an end not so much to Fuuga personally, but to this *era* supporting him.

On this night, Liscia and I were in the governmental affairs office, listening as

Mao reported that the setup that gave our plan the final push it needed was complete.

“All tasks are complete, Master Souma.”

“Oh, yeah? So we made it in time, then...” I murmured to myself, half relieved, half full of chagrin.

I was grateful to have the plan ready before my direct showdown with Fuuga. But what had bought us this time was Owen, Herman, and the other volunteers risking their lives. If only it'd been finished two days sooner.

The two old men's faces flashed through my mind. As I remembered them, anger and hatred for Fuuga coursed through me. If only he hadn't started this stupid war for his dreams and ambitions. I wanted to really let loose on him. Despite considering the drawbacks of killing Fuuga in this war, even though I understood it logically, it was hard to deny my emotions.

“Souma...” Liscia spoke softly as she put her hand on my shoulder.

“Huh?!” I snapped back to my senses and turned to see her with a slight smile.

“The look on your face was getting scary. I don't think Owen or Herman would have wanted that,” she chided me.

“Yeah, you're right...” I said, nodding meekly. We weren't in a situation where I needed to go into king mode yet.

I took a deep breath to calm myself, then turned to Mao.

“Thank you for your assistance, Mao. And sorry. Normally, you're not supposed to get involved in a battle between people, but I made you push yourself.”

Mao smiled at my apology and shook her head. “No. This matter had nothing to do with the war, so don't be concerned... If anything, I'm frustrated that this is all that I could do. I hear you had losses because of how long production took on my end.”

“No, you've all handled it well. Better than I could have expected. I really am grateful. Thanks, Mao.”

“And I thank you too, Madam Mao,” Liscia joined in.

“May Landians and Seadians find a future you can work towards together,” Mao said, smiling.

With that wish, her image vanished. Everything was all set up now.

“Liscia, how is deployment going?”

“It’s all done. The military and everyone else are in position and ready to fend off the Great Tiger Empire’s forces at any time. But the enemy has been marching slower since the delay they incurred, so I’m told that we don’t expect them to arrive until after tomorrow morning.”

Knowing Fuuga, I thought it was possible he would charge in recklessly once he checked his rear, but it didn’t seem to be happening. This was probably thanks to Owen and Herman risking their lives to stake him down.

Once he got the impression that my forces included guys who would defy me in order to launch suicide attacks, caution would be mandated.

Sighing, I looked at Liscia.

“The final battle’s tomorrow, then.”

“Yes. Everything will be decided tomorrow... Are you feeling tense?”

“Well, yeah. But not as tense as when we fought the Principality of Amidonia. We have more people on our side than back then, and none of our allies are at risk of betraying us. Unlike before, when we blindly grasped for solutions, everyone has coalesced around one idea, and we’re pretty calm.”

“Yes... Things were a mess back then.”

In the Amidonian War, we’d found ourselves caught at the intersection of so many people’s intentions—mine, Gaius and Julius’s, Georg’s, Castor’s, Roroa’s, those of the corrupt nobles who rebelled, those of the fence-sitting nobles I later executed, and finally Albert and Elisha’s.

Looking back on it now, it’s amazing I was able to stay calm. Compared to back then, everyone was now concentrated on one goal: protect the country from Fuuga and his men.

It wasn't just something we were feeling in this country. The Republic, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom, secretly the Dragon Knight Kingdom and Star Dragon Mountain Range, and the Seadians felt it too. It was no wonder I could stay so much calmer this time... Not that I didn't have *some* misgivings.

"Although, my intentions haven't changed from what they were then," Liscia said before leaning in close, pressing her lips against mine.

I responded in kind as we each explored the soft sensation. Liscia blushed, smiling as she brushed her hair back behind her ear with one hand.

"Then, now, and forever more... I will walk by your side, Souma."

"You know...I don't think you were quite so forward back then."

"I was waiting for you to make a move on me at the time."

"Well, *sorry*," I said teasingly, then stood up and hugged Liscia tight. She was surprised, but her body relaxed, and she entrusted herself to me.

"You too, Souma... You've gotten more proactive, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, yeah, I have more experience under my belt now, after all."

"Hee hee, of course you do. You have *so many* cute wives," she said, putting on a menacing smile.

"That smile's scary! Whoa, don't jab me in the ribs."

After playing around like that for a bit, Liscia gently pushed me away.

"With all that experience, you know, right? Whose side should you be by? I think...she's hurting more than any of us right now. So go be with her."

Seeing the look of sincerity on Liscia's face, I nodded.

I visited Yuriga's room, where Aisha was guarding the door.

Because of Yuriga's position, with the decisive battle approaching, I had Aisha stay with her as bodyguard and watcher. Yuriga was cooperating with us, but someone who didn't understand that might try to get in touch with her with bad intentions, and she needed someone to watch her so that she didn't get overcome by her sense of responsibility and do something desperate.

If Tomoe were still in the castle, I would've had her support Yuriga, but if anything happened to Tomoe in the conflict, that would be a huge blow not just to the Kingdom but to mankind as a whole. It would also leave Yuriga with a deep emotional scar, so having Tomoe evacuate along with Ichiha had been the right move.

"How is Yuriga?" I asked Aisha.

"Calm," she answered, glancing at the door. "We were just talking normally up until the evening."

"I see... Thanks for looking after her, Aisha."

"No. I've been worried about Yuriga too... But despite the strong face she's been putting on, I am sure she must have her own thoughts about what's happening. Your Majesty, please take care of Yuriga..."

"I know."

I knocked lightly on the door before entering Yuriga's room. She was sitting on the bed, facing me, holding a fluffy pillow in front of her face. Was she trying to be some kind of monster—the pillow-faced woman?

"What're you doing...?"

"I can't possibly face you, so I'm covering my face," Yuriga said, her voice somewhat muffled by the pillow.

Erm... This isn't the reaction I expected. I was thinking about how to comfort her if she was depressed, crying, or hiding her feelings to put on a strong face like Maria did when she was empress. But...I wasn't expecting to meet her in the guise of a pillow-faced woman.

I sat on a chair next to the bed as I considered what to do. Yuriga continued to bury her face in the pillow's soft confines.

"Huh? We're seriously going to talk with that pillow in between us?"

"Well, I have no right to look you in the face."

Yuriga was still saying the same thing.

"I heard...about Sir Owen and Sir Herman..." she continued. "I'd been

prepared for this kind of thing to happen if you and my brother fought... But not for people whose names I knew to be among those who died.”

“It’s nothing for you to feel bad about... Though, I guess saying that doesn’t help.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t. It’s a bit much to ask me not to feel something about it,” Yuriga said through the pillow.

What kind of look did she have on her face?

“Do you mind if I sit next to you...?”

I couldn’t tell whether it was better to leave her alone or be by her side.

“Go ahead,” she answered, patting the spot beside her on the bed.

Even as she patted the bed with one hand, her other arm still kept her face covered. It was a surreal sight, but I sat down next to her.

“What should you do when there’s nothing you can do?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know if I can explain it very well. There’s all these emotions swirling inside of me...but I can’t do a thing about them... I can’t handle any of it... What should I do at a time like that? Have you ever felt the same way in your time as king, Souma?”

“Yeah... Multiple times,” I told her honestly. “After a war, and after executing my enemies... When my orders necessitated the ending of people’s lives, I always felt conflicted about it, and it would keep me up at night. In my case, I had Liscia and the others to comfort me. Pathetic as that sounds, it’s reassuring to have someone at my side.”

“I see...”

“But I think it’s the same for everyone. After Maria made the decision that split her country, she cried like a child. That’s why I stayed by her side the whole time like Liscia and the others did for me.”

“*The* Maria did that? I can’t even imagine...”

“I spoiled her so rotten that, by the end of it, she had turned into a kitten.”

“What does that even mean?” she asked, stifling a small laugh.

Maybe I’d lightened her mood a bit.

“Well, I want you to not push yourself and let us spoil you... Or rather, if you act too sullen, we’ll spoil you whether you like it or not.”

“Huh?! I don’t even get a say in it?”

“If even one member of the family looks gloomy, all of us worry.”

“Even if it’s me?”

“You did marry into the family, missus.”

“My position’s been so delicate that we’ve all been so reserved around each other, so it just hasn’t sunk in yet.”

Having said that, Yuriga moved a little closer, letting our shoulders touch.

As we sat side by side, she asked me through the pillow, “Okay, if I ask you to comfort me... How are you going to do it?”

“How about something like this...?”

“Whuh... Mmph!”

I hugged her close and pushed my face against the pillow from the other side. If it weren’t in the way, we’d have been kissing.

Yuriga seemed surprised for a moment, but then the tension melted out of her shoulders.

After a little longer in that position, I said, “Well...what do you think?”

When I asked that with my face pressed into the pillow, Yuriga moved away slowly, lowering the pillow. Her exposed face was redder than a boiled octopus.

I could see the traces of tears in the corners of her eyes, which were dewy even now, but she still had the presence of mind to glare up at me.

After some time, she finally answered my question.

“It’d be better without the pillow...”

And so we did it again, without the pillow this time.





Chapter 11: The Moment the Era Changed

As the Great Tiger Empire's forces were about to arrive on the fields of Parnam, the scouts they'd sent ahead saw clusters of field camps and forts built to defend the capital, as well as the waiting forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia. It was similar to how the Western Army in the Battle of Sekigahara deployed in a formation that would engulf the advancing Eastern Army.

However, unlike the Western Army in Sekigahara, which was a mishmash of differing military forces without a common goal, the Kingdom of Friedonia's army was united in its desire to protect the country under the command of Souma and Liscia. The Western Army couldn't properly use their formation because of allies who betrayed them or refused to fight, but the Kingdom's forces could put this semiencirclement formation to good use.

Hearing about the formation from his scouts, Fuuga asked Hashim, "The Kingdom's army didn't shut itself inside Parnam Castle?"

"The castle's round walls are ill-suited to defense. If you consider both sides have tens of thousands of men at their disposal, fighting the decisive battle in the open field makes sense," Hashim said with a calm expression. "However, I would have expected them to meet us in battle at Red Dragon City..."

"Hmm. Looks like they pulled us in this far for a reason."

"A reason?" Mutsumi cocked her head to the side.

"Yeah." Fuuga nodded. "If there wasn't, Souma's retainers wouldn't have gone against his wishes and given their lives to buy him time like that. There's gotta be a good enough reason for them to have done it."

Fuuga viewed Owen and Herman's actions in a serious light. Souma wasn't the type to order his retainers to their deaths. The way his men had fought at those two bases—prepared to blow themselves up to delay the enemy—must have been a decision they'd made for themselves out of loyalty.

Turning that around, there must have been something that made his retainers think, *If we sacrifice ourselves here, the Kingdom can definitely win, and, Our sacrifices won't have been in vain.*

After watching the Kingdom's forces for some time, Fuuga gave his orders.

"All forces. Get in position. They aren't going to come here to attack us when they're already holding advantageous positions. Keep your guards up, and be ready to launch a general offensive at any moment."

"Yes, sir!"

The Empire's forces got into formation and entered the fields where the Kingdom's forces were waiting.



"Souma... It's almost time, huh?" Liscia murmured from beside me.

I watched from the main camp, near Parnam, with Liscia, Aisha, and Naden as the Great Tiger Empire's forces entered the plains. For this battle, we wouldn't be shutting ourselves inside the castle. That was partially because Parnam Castle wasn't well suited to defend, but also because the city's structure, reaching as far as the walls, was part of the magic circle used to summon a hero.

It might only be able to be activated once every several centuries, but generations after I was gone, they might need to summon someone from Earth in the past once again. To make sure it was still possible when that time came, I needed to avoid any heavy damage to the summoning system. Thus, I'd built defensive fortifications in the fields and prepared to meet the enemy.

"All right," Liscia said to herself, thrusting her rapier into her belt. "Well, Souma. I'm off."

Per Liscia's request, she would lead an army, just like she had in the Amidonian War. I was officially in charge of this war, but Ludwin would be giving commands. Defense Force Commander-in-Chief Excel had an important role to play, so we decided that Ludwin would direct the entire army, with Kaede as his advisor.

The army was split into east, central (south), and west groups. The eastern side was commanded by Liscia, the western side was commanded by Weist Garreau, and the center was commanded by Julius.

Because this was a battle between two much larger forces than those in the Amidonian War, the decisions made in the field were vital. We couldn't afford to leave Liscia, who had the ability to command, sitting in reserve in the main camp.

Looking at Liscia, who seemed so dependable in battle mode, I said, "I know you wouldn't stop if I asked you to, so I won't, but don't push yourself."

"I ought to say the same to you. You're always getting yourself into trouble."

"You think?"

"In the refugee camp, you rushed out to protect Juno from those ruffians, and then in the Amidonian War, you were almost killed by Gaius VIII. From what I hear, you acted recklessly during the demon wave, when you fought Ooyamizuchi, *and* when you saved Maria. All that despite not being very strong."

"Urkh... I've got no argument."

Having been together as long as we had, she knew all my weaknesses.

Liscia chuckled. "Don't worry. I'll protect it all—our family, our house, and our country."

"You're one gutsy mom."

"Aisha, Naden. Take care of Souma for me."

"Yes, ma'am! Understood."

"Roger that."

Nodding with satisfaction at their responses, Liscia left the main camp.

Liscia, Aisha, Naden, and Yuriga—as well as Roroa, Maria, and Juna, who weren't here—were working in their own ways. So that our family, including the kids who were in Venetino, could all meet together in one place again someday.

Today, I'm bringing Fuuga's era to a close.



At the same time, in the main camp, at Ludwin's command station, Ludwin, Kaede, and Julius were reviewing the strategy together one last time. Kaede's partner, Halbert, and his other partner, Ruby, were also in attendance.

Kaede pointed at a map of the battlefield. "If His Majesty's plan comes to fruition, the Great Tiger Empire's forces will gradually lose momentum. Until then, we have to hold this half-encirclement formation and defend it so that the Empire's forces can't advance any farther. We must fight this field battle as if it were a siege battle, you know."

"Yeah," said Ludwin. "Thanks to Kaede and her earth mages, we already have bases to defend and tunnels connecting them. If we focus solely on defending, we should be able to hold them off."

"I suppose so..." Julius nodded.

However, despite his verbal agreement, he had a troubled look.

"Sir Julius. Is something the matter?" asked Ludwin.

"No...I think we've done more than enough preparation for any ordinary battle. But knowing that Fuuga and Durga have a way of turning such things on their heads...it's hard to feel at ease. Despite our preparedness."

"I see where you're coming from..." Ludwin nodded with satisfaction. "He's a single individual who's able to change the battlefield through his own feats of bravery, after all."

If Fuuga came charging in on Durga's back, this formation wouldn't have the defensive power to stop them. They'd deployed antiair repeating bolt throwers to create a situation in which it was harder to send Fuuga to the front line for fear of him getting injured, but if they put the Empire's forces in a position in which fielding him became necessary, then he would come regardless.

And if Souma's plan worked, Fuuga's side would definitely find itself pushed into a corner.

"A wounded beast can be incredibly frightening, you know," Kaede

murmured, capturing the grave atmosphere in the room.

“And that’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?” Halbert said, thumping his chest confidently and dispelling that atmosphere. “If Fuuga shows his face, then me, Ruby, and the elites of the Mobile Wyvern Cavalry will stop him with everything we’ve got. It’s the whole reason we were deployed here as an anti-Fuuga unit.”

The combination of Durga and Fuuga could turn the tides of any battle by itself. The former was faster and more agile than the dragons of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and the latter was a better warrior than Aisha and could fire lightning bolts on the same level as Naden’s. This was why Souma and the others saw them as the greatest threat. For this reason, a special unit had been formed centered around Halbert and Ruby with the Mobile Wyvern Cavalry, and their sole mission was to counter Fuuga.

“Captain Castor’s keeping half of the enemy’s air force busy over in Red Dragon City. That means we can throw everything we’ve got at stopping Fuuga.”

“Yes. I’m not about to let that big cat do whatever it likes.” Ruby nodded in agreement with Halbert. Being a dragon who carried a knight, she apparently felt a rivalry with Fuuga’s mount, Durga.

Kaede looked worriedly at the two of them.

“I know I shouldn’t say this as one responsible for giving orders in this operation, but still... Don’t be reckless. If the war ends and we win, but you two are gone, leaving me alone with Bill... I’ll cry, you know.”

Hearing Kaede speak to them not as their commander but as family, Halbert and Ruby both nodded.

“Yeah! Let’s all make it back home with smiles on our faces.”

“I agree. You let me hold Bill, so I won’t be dying until I let you hold the child I’ll be having with Hal.”

“Hee hee, Velza must be worried too. Let’s all make it back home smiling.”

Ludwin and Julius looked at one another and smiled wryly.

“Now I suddenly find myself wanting to see Genia.”

“Likewise, Sir Ludwin. Let’s put this war behind us and hurry to Venetinoa to pick up Tia and Tius.”

They each reaffirmed their commitment while thinking of their loved ones.

At this point, Commander-in-Chief Excel showed up. They all stood up straight at her arrival. Excel smiled at the five of them, producing a fan from the sleeve of her usual frilly outfit and pointing it in their direction.

“It’s time. Now then, people, let’s have you all get to your positions.”

““““Yes, ma’am!””””

The five answered Excel’s quiet words with a salute.



The Great Tiger Empire’s forces began deploying into position so they could attack the Kingdom’s defending forces...

“I-I have a report!” A messenger shouted as they rushed into Fuuga’s main camp. “The Kingdom’s camps have begun making massive orbs of water!”

Hearing this, Fuuga and the others stepped outside their tent. They looked up to find great balls of water floating in midair. But the balls were more than mere water—they appeared to be receivers used in fountain plazas across the continent. It seemed Souma was intending to use them for a broadcast.

“So you’ve still got something to say this late in the game, Souma...?” Fuuga murmured.

Soon enough, Souma appeared on the receivers in his military uniform.

“This is an announcement for everyone seeing this image,” he began. “I am the king of the United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia, and leader of the Maritime Alliance, Souma E. Friedonia.”

Fuuga was perplexed by Souma’s words. The people of the Kingdom of Friedonia obviously knew him, and Fuuga’s men all saw him as the enemy they needed to defeat. Considering that fact, it was strange to start with an introduction.

Souma wouldn’t take long to explain why he was doing this.

“This image is currently visible in fountain plazas all over the world, and anywhere there is a simple receiver. In other words, this is a worldwide broadcast. The same as what was utilized by the Great Tiger Empire against the former Gran Chaos Empire. They investigated the Gran Chaos Empire’s frequencies in order to hijack them and broadcast the image of Valois surrounded by Great Tiger Empire forces...”

He paused.

“This is more or less the same thing. The difference is that we of the Maritime Alliance have switched our frequencies to those used by the Great Tiger Empire, as identified by our spies. I’ve also informed the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, and even the Seadians in the far north that I will be broadcasting on this frequency at this time.”

With a bold expression, Souma held up one finger.

“Now, unlike the forces of the Great Tiger Empire, who’ve come all the way to Parnam, the people back home can just turn off the machine and not watch. But let me say...if you watch to the end, it’ll be worth your while. You won’t regret it! What I will reveal will affect all of mankind, whether in the Kingdom of Friedonia or the Great Tiger Empire.”

Souma declared this with absolute confidence.

“Do you wish to charge in at once and disrupt the broadcast?” Hashim asked Fuuga, but Fuuga shook his head.

“I doubt it’d be that easy to stop. We’ll be in more trouble if we’re distracted by his words during the battle. Let’s hear him out for now, as long as he’s not just buying time. But make sure the troops are ready to move at any moment.”

“As you wish.”

The projection of Souma carried on while Fuuga and the others watched.

“Currently, the forces of the Empire have pushed all the way to our capital, Parnam, and they’re in a staredown with my own forces. We’ve been able to conserve our war potential up until this point in order to meet them at our best. The Empire’s morale must be high too, since the future rests on this one battle. It will be an intense struggle, I’m sure... But before that, there’s something I

want you to hear. Oh, by the way, I'm not about to start talking about the morality of launching an invasive war of aggression at this point."

Souma gave a performative shrug.

"I know there's no point in that. I *could* condemn it, but the people enraptured by the great man, Fuuga, wouldn't listen to a word I said. They're only interested in seeing the conclusion to his epic tale."

The Empire's forces were surprised to see Souma demonstrate some understanding of why they had invaded. If you one-sidedly condemned people, they stopped listening. However, if you showed partial understanding, they momentarily set aside their bias and opened their ears.

He's good at this kind of stuff, thought Fuuga, impressed by Souma's eloquence. *It's one area in which he's better than I.*

Souma continued.

"A great man, Fuuga Haan, appeared in a small corner of the Union of Eastern Nations—changing a world locked in stagnation. He drove off the demon wave, unified the Union of Eastern Nations, and defeated the massive Gran Chaos Empire while seizing half of its land. All this to build the Great Tiger Empire of Haan, the largest empire our history has ever known. Then he resolved the issue of the Demon Lord's Domain, which had long tormented mankind, and unveiled the true nature of the Demon Lord and the Seadians."

Most of those achievements had been accomplished with the cooperation of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Maritime Alliance, but Souma didn't say that. It was self-evident to the people of the Maritime Alliance, and he felt as though it would be better not to boast if he wanted the Empire's citizens to listen to him.

"Now, the time has come to settle things between Fuuga Haan and the last powerful opponent that remains."

He raised his hand into a thinking pose.

"Many of you must be thinking... 'Fuuga Haan can go as far as it takes,' or 'Fuuga Haan can conquer this continent.' Perhaps you're of the mind that 'once we're all one country, world peace will come,' or 'things are hard now, but we'll

be rewarded once Fuuga dominates the entire continent.’ Those living in countries ravaged by Fuuga might feel ‘it was necessary for this historical achievement.’ And seeing our nation invaded by him, you think, ‘If it’s to realize his grand dream, you can’t really blame him for destroying them.’”

Souma understood the way Fuuga’s supporters felt. It was these kinds of thoughts that led people to support Fuuga, even when his actions were inhumane. So long as their thoughts remained unchanged, Fuuga could rise again, no matter how many times he was defeated. That was proof that he was a great man and the reason he was the favorite child of this era.

“But...that’s all an illusion.”

Souma’s demeanor changed. He looked almost pitying.

“Because even if he does defeat me, and brings the entirety of the Maritime Alliance under his sway, and continues on to subjugate the remaining independents like Nothung and Garlan...that still won’t mean that he’s conquered the world. I want you to see this.”

A map of the world then appeared on the broadcast. It was a familiar map with the diamond-shaped continent, along with the outlying islands of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom and the Spirit Kingdom.

The people of the Empire cocked their heads to the side, wondering what Souma was talking about, but Fuuga alone had his eyes wide open.

“I get it! You’re going to use that information here, Souma!” Fuuga shouted as another map appeared above the first.

The second map was mostly empty, but there was a tiny fragment of land near the bottom center of it with islands scattered around.

Souma didn’t hesitate to identify this newly added blank map.

“You see...north of where we reside here in Landia is another world, mirroring our own in size. This far-off land is known as Seadia. It’s where the people we called demons—the Seadians—came from. Landia and Seadia were cut off from one another by a mysterious magic. However, a hole opened up connecting them, bringing swarms of monsters that threatened this continent and endangering the Seadian refugees.”

The joint declaration on the nature of the Seadians that'd been released by the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire had already made public that they were refugees from another world. This is why people understood that the Seadians had come from a place Landians didn't know, and they could imagine it was somewhere up north in terra incognita. But they never imagined the world of the north could be as large as the world of the south.

People tended to believe the information they could see for themselves. Based on the population of the Seadians, people assumed that whatever nation they'd come from couldn't be any larger than the islands of the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. In order to prevent panic, the elites of the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire had made no attempt to correct that misconception. And this was why Souma had chosen now to reveal the truth.

This is my proof that Fuuga's conquest of the continent won't lead to him conquering the world.

This meant that what mankind had thought was the finish line was no longer that now. They believed that if Fuuga could realize his grand ambition and conquer the continent, that would be the end. The world would be one, Fuuga's epic story would conclude, and true peace would come to the world. That was why people supported Fuuga even when it was painful, and even if countries had been destroyed or were about to be destroyed, they just had to endure it until he crossed the finish line.

However, that finish line no longer existed...

If his goal was still world domination, even if he brought the Maritime Alliance under his dominion and conquered Landia, the challenging days would continue. Of course, some might ignore Seadia and consider just dominating Landia to be the goal reached. However, that wasn't a view all of mankind could share.

The people who'd sacrificed for the grand dream couldn't be satisfied by stopping at some point along the way. Those whose nations had been annexed by the Great Tiger Empire in the name of unifying the world would be indignant, asking what they'd lost their homelands for if he stopped only "halfway." The people who'd walked this hard road for his dream would be angry, asking what

all their efforts had been for.

Souma's words created a clear divide among Fuuga's supporters. Of course, Souma understood this, so he went on talking plainly, as if it didn't concern him.

"From what the Seadians have told us, Seadia is a world overrun with monsters. The demon waves were the result of some of the monsters from that world drifting into this one, so there must be a great number of them indeed. Our lack of information and understanding means there's no telling what lies in ninety-nine percent of the land there. We can't rule out that there could be more kaiju like the one that attacked the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. The gate to that world has been closed, but the monsters and Seadia still exist. If something were to connect the worlds again, it's possible the same tragedy could be repeated."

Having said this, Souma raised his right hand to eye level.

"In order to prevent that, the Maritime Alliance believes we must cooperate with the Seadians and advance into Seadia from our side. As a first step towards that, let me show you this video..."

Souma snapped his fingers, and the projected image switched over to a scene of a dense jungle.

The area shown was likely tropical, like the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. A cacophony of birds could be heard chirping in the background. The viewers felt as if they could feel the heat and humidity from the other side of the projection.

In the forest, four men and women were walking along. They were dressed like an adventuring party consisting of a male swordsman, a male brawler, a female mage, and a male priest. The brawler who was walking at the back, keeping a wary eye behind them, called out to the leader, the swordsman walking at the front.

"It's so hot... Hey, Dece. Are they really here? Maybe they moved already?"

"This is where the reported sighting was. If they aren't here, then we need to confirm that and report it."

The priest walking in front of the brawler turned and chided him.

“It’s dangerous to let your guard down, Augus! There are reams of monsters here that aren’t recorded in the *Monster Encyclopedia*, after all,” the priest said, tightly holding the encyclopedia of monsters that Ichiha had published as if it were a holy text.

The mage who was walking beside him chuckled. “Ha ha. I know you’re a priest by role, but it’s funny seeing you hold that encyclopedia so preciously. Is it that important to you, Febral?”

“Of course, Julia. This is my bible.”

Dece smiled wryly at this declaration from Febral.

A shadowy figure raced up to the four of them. It was a green-haired female thief.

Dece wasted no time before talking to her. “How was it, Juno?”

“Yeah, they’re here. At two o’clock. We’re downwind of them, so they haven’t noticed us yet.”

The thief, Juno, pointed back in the direction she’d come. The other four nodded with serious expressions on their faces.

Then Juno glanced in another direction, away from the four. The people watching the broadcast felt as though she’d just looked them in the eye.

Dece, the group’s leader, pulled the sword from his belt and told his companions, “Okay, let’s go. It’s hunting time.”



These events had happened about a month before the war broke out, while the Kingdom of Friedonia was busy preparing for the coming of the Great Tiger Empire.

Juno had come to Parnam Castle one night. She’d been by so many times she’d lost count, joining King Souma and his queens for secret tea parties. But that wasn’t what she’d come for that day. Souma had used Little Musashibo to contact her and say he had a job for her.

With practiced steps, Juno climbed trees and the walls until she reached the balcony. Souma and Liscia were already there, with tea laid out on the table like

always.

Juno furrowed her brow suspiciously at this sight. “Is this the time to be leisurely drinking tea? War’s coming, you know?”

“Yeah?” Souma replied with a hint of resignation in his voice. “You’re right. There’s probably no avoiding war with the Great Tiger Empire.”

“Then this is no time for tea parties,” Juno asserted, deeply concerned. “Don’t waste your time on me.”

“Now, now,” Souma chided her. “The part about us having a job for you is true. Don’t just stand around; have a seat, and let’s discuss it over tea.”

“Come on, Juno, sit down,” Liscia urged. “You’ll have black tea, right?”

“Uh... Sure.”

Juno hesitantly took a seat. While Liscia served tea and coffee, Souma spoke.

“What are the adventurers doing? We’ve broken off our contract with the guild, so I don’t believe adventurers have any responsibility to participate in the war effort.”

“You’re right. From what I’ve heard, most of us are planning to hightail it out of here before the war breaks out,” Juno said. “Though, if the Great Tiger Empire and the Maritime Alliance fight, the whole world will be at war, so nowhere will be safe. People are thinking of going to the countryside, where the fires of war aren’t as likely to spread...”

“I see.”

“Oh, and there are some idiots who want to side with the Great Tiger Empire and make a name for themselves. They must think that if they prove themselves fighting for the aggressors, they’ll be able to reap some tasty benefits.”

Juno gulped down the tea Liscia served her all in one go, then grinned.

“There’s also an even smaller group of even *bigger* idiots, like us, who’re talking about serving the country as volunteers. There are a good number of adventurers who love this country, even if they don’t have ties to you like I do. After all, it’s a country where they earn good money and never have to worry

about missing a meal... Well, if you leave a fanatical worshipper of Ichiha Chima like Febral alone, he'll help you with everything he's got."

"As king, that's gratifying to hear."

"I agree. I appreciate the sentiment too," Liscia added, smiling wryly along with Souma.

They spoke words of gratitude but didn't seem to want the help. Juno cocked her head to the side, wondering why that was, and Souma awkwardly scratched his cheek.

"The thing is, I have a job proposition for adventurers who are cooperating with us. It's a far more important quest than joining us on the lines of battle."

"An important quest?"

"Yeah. So, Juno..." Souma's expression grew serious. "Could you go ahead of us on an adventure to the world of the north?"



As Juno and her party walked through the jungle, a narrator with a deep voice spoke over the footage.

"And now, those adventurers are traversing the undiscovered world of the north."

Those in the know would have been able to figure out that this deep, somewhat ostentatious voice belonged to Weist Garreau. However, Weist was currently deployed among the defenders in the field outside Parnam, showing this broadcast was different from those that had come before.

"This is the world that the Seadians, the people of the north, were driven from by monsters. It is a world full of many unknowns for us, the people of the south. The chief of the Seadians, Mao, has told us that there are monsters out there so massive that they can change the landscape, giving birth to new islands and erasing others. Thus, our maps will likely be of little use."

The broadcast showed Juno and the others emerging from the jungle. In the distance, they spotted something. It was red, hairy, and huge—seemingly feeding on a deer the size of a grown man it had presumably killed.

Juno and the party quickly hid in the grass at the sight of it.

“It’s a redbear, just like in the report,” Febrile announced. “They exist on the southern continent too. It doesn’t appear to be a monster, but...it’s still too large.”

Augus sighed. “Redbears are, what, two meters tall at most? That thing looks like it’s at least three meters.”

“It shows that even wild animals grow bigger and stronger here in the lands of the north,” Febral said, to which Dece nodded.

“Only the strong can survive in a world overrun by monsters.”

“Survival of the fittest, huh?” Julia said in a relaxed tone.

Juno’s expression grew tense. “So...what do we do? If that thing is roaming around here, our camp’s in danger.”

Their eyes all gathered on their leader, Dece.

After some time, he said, “Let’s hunt it. It’d be bad if we lost track of it while heading back to report. Massive as it is, it’s still a creature we know how to handle, so we should be more than capable of beating it.”

“Aw, yeah!” Augus clenched his fists as if he’d been waiting for this.

Dece and Augus would walk out in front of the group, drawing the redbear’s attention as they fought it, while Julia and Febral supported them with magic, and Juno would stay in the middle, disrupting the beast so it couldn’t go after her allies in the rear. With those roles decided, they got into position and slowly closed in on the redbear.

Just as Dece raised his left hand to signal them to attack...

“Huh?! Hold on, Dece! Above you!” Juno shouted, noticing something.

The sudden yell made the redbear stop and turn towards Juno and the party. However, given the urgency of Juno’s warning, she didn’t care that the redbear had noticed them.

The members of the party looked up. As they did, they saw something descending rapidly from the sun’s direction.

“Hide!” Dece commanded.

His companions reflexively concealed themselves in the brush. Soon enough, the aerial assailant assaulted the redbear that had been eyeing Juno.

“Gugahhhhh!”

“Gagwagh?!”

The massive creature that had flown down seized the redbear with both legs, forcing the beast to the ground. It then bit into the redbear’s neck as it struggled to escape, twisting and breaking bones with ease. The redbear, killed instantly, remained limp. Its assailant feasted on the remains, which were now no more than a hunk of meat. The thick fur proved no obstacle as it messily stuffed its maw.

As this scene from the wild unfolded, Juno and her party regrouped, trying not to attract the predator’s attention.

“That’s a wyvern, right?! Why’s it so big and strong?!” Juno whispered.

Julia whispered in response, “It looks like five, maybe six people could ride it.”

Febral’s face twitched. “We’re used to seeing domesticated wyverns, but it seems they’re rather high up on the food chain in this world. Since we’ve come here, it’s just been one discovery after another that upsets all our common understandings. My word...”

“So, what now, Dece? Our mission was to investigate the redbear and eliminate it if possible, right?”

Dece thought about Augus’s question a little before shaking his head.

“This is too far outside our expectations. In a situation like this, without any hope of assistance from the other teams, it would be reckless to engage that thing. Even if we managed to overcome it somehow, I doubt we’d have the stamina left to get back to camp afterwards.”

“It’d really suck to kill that wyvern, only to be wiped out by another redbear on the way back!” Juno added.

“Yeah.” Dece nodded in agreement. “Wild wyverns have a wide territory, so it probably won’t linger here. We’ve confirmed the death of the redbear we were

targeting. Let's pull out. We can report what we saw back to headquarters."

""""Got it.""""

Juno and the party left silently so as not to be detected by the wyvern.

The video continued displaying the wyvern feeding on the redbear for some time, but eventually, it moved to a close-up of Juno's face.

"Come on, Mr. Little Musashibo! Quit filming; it's time to scram!"

With that, the video switched. Unlike the tense atmosphere up until this point, there were images of jungles, forests, rivers, waterfalls, and beaches unlike anything the people had ever seen. The video then showed scenes of massive creatures struggling against one another in the vastness of nature as the narration began to speak again.

"This is the land the Seadians were driven from. A land of new horizons that we Landians of the south have never seen. This is a savage world where monsters and other powerful creatures vie for survival, and no one knows what has been left behind."

The video showed images of a ruin in the jungle and a pyramid sunk beneath the sea. Were there truly such places in the world of the north?

"What awaits us there? Traps? Treasure? What will come to the explorers? Glory or death? No one yet knows the answer. There are no nations here. No kings. No class structure. Only villages of those who have taken the first step. This is a world where anyone can become a great man. If you can win the people's trust, you can establish a country where you will be king. Or perhaps you will continue to roam in search of adventure."

The video looked from the high mountains to the jungle below and then to the countless islands beyond. With that, the narrator delivered his final line:

"What will all of you see in this world?"



When the video finished, the Great Tiger Empire's camp was silent.

They would take a little longer to process what they'd just seen. But with time...they would figure it out. The impulse welled up from deep inside them.

I watched them from the main camp of the Kingdom's army.

"Is that the secret plan you were talking about, Souma?" Naden asked from beside me.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I used the record and playback functions that became available to me after I met with Mao in order to produce it. It's a promotional video to invite people to the frontier."

When I was holding talks with Mao in Mao City, the topic of whether she could release some of what Genia would call "overscience" for us to use had come up. Mao and Madam Tiamat had certain limitations placed on them, so it would be difficult for them to release any technologies they hadn't created themselves, but they could expand the functionality of the jewels we were already using.

It turned out that the images being broadcast were stored inside the jewel, and it was possible to extract and rebroadcast them. In other words, I could use this recording and playback function. Using this feature, I wanted to make a promotional video that would help shift people's attention from "conquering the continent" to "advancing into the world of the north." What I had Mao doing up until the last minute—even using the time Owen and the others bought for me—was editing the video and preparing it for broadcast.

"I'm sure someone out there's already said, 'War isn't a game.' But there are guys who treat it like one. Fuuga and his supporters probably see his ambition of conquering the continent as one grand game. The sort of thing where conquering the world means you win, and losing means it's game over."

"Ah... We warriors often liken victory and defeat to a board game," Aisha said with some awkwardness, possibly because she could see how it applied to herself.

Well, Caesar himself said, "Alea jacta est," so it was probably pretty common to compare war to games or gambling. (Disregarding for the moment whether he actually said it in reality.)

When I considered that, I had a thought. *Fuuga and his men are playing a simulation game. One modeled on Romance of the Three Kingdoms or the Sengoku period, where you move forces around on the map and attempt to*

unify the country under your rule...

But in simulation games, there was a pattern. Once your faction grew and you overcame encirclement, it became boring since you would've almost finished conquering the land. Being the most powerful force by the late game means you're just repeatedly stomping on weaker powers, turning the game into a chore. If there happened to be two major powers in the late game, then it devolved into a slog where you had to fight the same enemy repeatedly until they were destroyed.

This was the kind of situation Fuuga and his men were in currently. They'd destroyed nations and had their own countries destroyed, so they had to see it through to the game's ending. They would defeat the Maritime Alliance, accomplish the grand feat of uniting the continent, and then all their troubles would be rewarded. They just had to hang on until then.

But what if they were presented with a different game?

What would they think if they were playing a simulation game that turned into busy work and saw a promotional video for a hunting action game or one where they could explore an uninhabited land? Wouldn't they want to play that game instead?

"Whether they win or lose, the game we know as the epic tale of Fuuga is in the process of ending. What will the people of the Great Tiger Empire think if they're presented with a *much more fun game* now? Where one can advance into an unknown northern frontier? They've been told it's not just Fuuga's epic tale waiting for them there, but a story in which any of them could become great men themselves."

"The more I hear, the nastier this whole scheme of yours sounds," Naden said with a sour look. "Come to think of it, you sounded like you thought it was distasteful yourself when you said, 'I'm going to bring an end to Fuuga's era.'"

"I see how it is... By forcefully bringing about an era in which people no longer need Fuuga, you cause him to lose his superiority as the favored child of this one... This strategy seems entirely focused on taking down Fuuga personally. If the people of the Great Tiger Empire realize that..." Aisha trailed off as she looked at the forces of the Great Tiger Empire.

“Exactly.” I nodded. “Seeing what we’ve shown them, can they still continue this boring game?”



Fewer than one percent of those who saw the video Souma showed properly understood the meaning of it. But even those who didn’t understand it still felt something.

The people of the Maritime Alliance and other countries like the Dragon Knight Kingdom that weren’t siding with the Great Tiger Empire likely thought, “Why’s he showing us this now?” They could understand that Souma and the other brains of the Maritime Alliance had some plan for after the war. But in order to carry out whatever that plan was, they would need to do something about the Great Tiger Empire first... There was no point in dreaming about the future until they dealt with the crisis before them. The video did nothing to raise their morale, but it didn’t cause a great deal of confusion either.

On the other hand, the people aligned with the Great Tiger Empire felt a stir within their hearts.

The Great Tiger Empire had grown to a massive state with a large population. All of these people, originally from different countries with different ways of thinking, were currently banded together by Fuuga’s charisma. You could say that the Great Tiger Empire was where people had come together to entrust their dreams to Fuuga’s grand ambition of conquering the continent.

Fuuga understood that, so he’d held up his far-reaching vision for all to see, gathering support by letting them think they were participants in his epic tale. Those who pushed back against his narrative became villains in the story, and those who supported him played the role of his allies, creating a system that might be called the “theatrical way of domination.”

Everything centered around Fuuga, including the era itself.

But now, that era had begun to waver. With so many people gathered in the country, they interpreted the video Souma showed them in many disparate ways. The old guard, who were warriors in spirit, like Fuuga himself, couldn’t help but feel a sense of excitement. They were a bunch of dreamers, not driven by any sort of profit, who’d come from a small corner of the Union of Eastern

Nations to race across the continent, declaring their hegemony. Once they learned there was *another* adventure to be had—one unlike any they’d ever known before, in a world that could be theirs—then of course they would get excited.

“This...is going to cause a split,” Shuukin murmured to himself.

Far to the west of Parnam, on the border between the Great Tiger Empire and the Euphoria Kingdom, the staredown continued as both sides waited for Souma and Fuuga to settle things. The two forces had done nothing but glare at each other for days now, but out of nowhere today, a water sphere for broadcasting had appeared above the main Euphoria camp. Projected in it were Souma’s speech and that video.

“Lord Shuukin? What do you mean by a split?” Elulu asked from beside him.

“Elulu.” Shuukin looked at her with sadness in his eyes. “What did you think when you saw that video?”

“Me? I thought the world of the north seemed pretty interesting...”

“Yeah. I’m sure it is for you,” Shuukin said with a wry smile at Elulu’s earnest words. “But for me...I’m drawn to it so strongly that I can’t help myself. A world I haven’t seen? Adventures I’ve yet to taste? Knowing it’s out there, I don’t want to compete with the other nations of mankind for dominance; I want to go and *find* it. I’d heard about the world the Seadians came from, but I never imagined it was as big as our own world. And we could actually go there? Honestly, I envy the adventurers.”

Shuukin crossed his arms and groaned before continuing.

“If I’d known about that world before this war...I might’ve advised my friend Fuuga to stop trying to conquer the south so that we could advance into the north instead. Although...Fuuga and I were already in a position where we could no longer do that...”

“Lord Shuukin...”

As Elulu looked at Shuukin with concern, there was a loud clatter behind them. Surprised, Elulu turned to look and saw Lumiere had thrown the rapier that hung at her hip down on the ground, scabbard and all.

“M-Miss Lumiere?”

“They changed the ‘end’ on us...”

Lumiere gazed up at the sky with a look of frustration.

“I thought...we were almost there. Just a little further, and the continent would be united. I wanted my name included in that great achievement... That’s what I thought when I stabbed my friends and Lady Maria in the back to join this side.” She spoke in a level tone, but it sounded like she was crying. “Yet now...I’ve lost sight of where the end is. If the people want us to conquer another world just as big as this one...how many more years will that be? Can we maintain a country of this size for that long?”

Elulu tried to say something, but Shuukin put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. He must have decided that all they could do was leave Lumiere alone until she settled down.

“Elulu, we all gathered under Fuuga’s dream. But we all pursue it with different levels of passion. Some cheer Fuuga on of their own accord. Some believe in him blindly. Some believe because those around them believe. And some never had any choice other than to believe... Those differences will appear in how they react after seeing that video.”

“That’s why you said...there’s going to be a split?”

Shuukin nodded in response to Elulu’s question.

The hearts of those who supported Fuuga were shaken up in a thousand different ways after seeing the video. For one example, the Great Tiger Empire’s forces on the Republic front...

Nata the Battle Maniac was only interested in fighting tough opponents, so the video didn’t resonate with him. Whether in the world of the north or the world of the south, he was happy as long as he could go wild.

In contrast, most former Zemish mercenaries who made up the Great Tiger Empire’s forces on this front felt differently. They had always seen rising by their skill with a blade alone as a virtue, and they were powerfully attracted to the world of the north, where that seemed possible. Mercenary State Zem had already been annexed, and many of them would’ve rather fought freely in the

world of the north instead of under the regulations of the Great Tiger Empire. The top commander on this front, Moumei, would struggle to control his soldiers, whose morale kept falling.

For another example, there was the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. They had pulled back from the Amidonia Region and were hardening their own nation's defenses, but this video caused mass confusion for them. The existence of the Seadians in and of itself had already been difficult to reconcile with church doctrine, and now a massive new world had just been revealed. They argued over how to save a world that the Lunarians, disciples of Lunaria, the god of the moon, had not descended on.

Because the Orthodox Papal State had seen repeated infighting, suppression, and purges, there were sparks smoldering everywhere. There were suppressed and purged factions trying to use this confusion in order to make a comeback or take revenge, so there was no way they could take unified action against the Maritime Alliance anymore. And in the middle of all this, Saint Anne, who was the one who should have quelled the chaos, had shut herself in her room.

She gazed idly up at the sky from her balcony.

If we lose the radiance of our Holy King Fuuga and his dream of conquering the continent... Then...what was all of this for...?

The screams of burning heretics and the fresh blood of those who had died in battle, believing she was a saint, flashed through Anne's mind. She'd gone on playing her role as a saint all this time, telling herself that it was all for the faith, all for Lady Lunaria. However...the scriptures she'd believed in were easily shaken by just one video.

Why were those people burned, then? Why was blood shed? Why did she have to send those who believed in her to their deaths on the battlefield?

These questions tormented young Anne. She had killed her heart to be a saint, but now that the very existence of saints was shaken, she was starting to feel a sense of heartache.

It might be easier to just cast myself from this balcony...

The thought tormented her.

Anne placed her hand on the railing, but another image flashed through her mind—the look in Mary’s eyes as the former saint extended her hand to her. If Anne was going to run away now, she should have taken Mary’s hand back then. It was her own responsibility that she hadn’t.

She had to face her decisions head-on. Anne would not let herself run away. Even if a day of reckoning for her sins was to come, she would play the role of saint until the very end.

That is how I’ll take responsibility, she swore to herself.

In this manner, Fuuga’s supporters had countless emotional reactions to the video. It was the same within the main force that Fuuga led, which had been psyched up to face the Friedonian army in a decisive battle. They still thought that conquering the southern continent would be a great achievement. That hadn’t changed.

However, once they learned about the existence of the world to the north, the point of this war was shaken.

Even if they subjugated all the nations of mankind, they wouldn’t control the entire world. This would divide the hearts of the people. Some would feel that dominating the southern continent was still a great accomplishment, so it should be done first. Others would doubt the need, as dominating the continent wouldn’t mean they ruled over the entire world.

As for the people whose countries had been absorbed by the Great Tiger Empire, the sentiment was this: while they’d been willing to accept the loss of their nations for the sake of accomplishing something great, if there was still a world that they could get their hands on without warring against their fellow man, why had their old countries needed to be destroyed?

Those who desired personal advancement thought that even if they won against the Kingdom of Friedonia, they only stood to gain so much from it. The lion’s share of the fame and land would go to the old guard, and unless they made quite a name for themselves, all they’d get was maybe some of the plunder. That being the case, they might have a better chance of making a name for themselves by adventuring into the world of the north.

The people who didn't find their life's purpose in battle and were mustering what courage they had for the sake of this grand dream—and who made up the vast majority of the Great Tiger Empire's forces—thought: rather than face the unpredictable Kingdom of Friedonia, they were probably safer fighting monsters in the world of the north.

In this way, you can see how the people's hearts were a chaotic mess, but the doubt budding in all of them was the same.

Just how valuable is this war, really?

With that doubt sown, there was no way they could fight to the best of their ability. Yet even as he stood inside a country thrown into disarray, Fuuga's expression remained calm.

Mutsumi spoke to him, her tone full of concern. "It seems...the men really are shaken up by this."

"Yeah...I know how they feel." Fuuga nodded without hesitation, then followed it up with a shrug of dismay. "I'm sure that if I'd been shown that video all of a sudden, I'd have wanted to go north too. If I'd been presented with the interesting dream of developing a new world in place of dominating the continent... Well, the fact is, while I want to commit myself to this war, my own heart is swayed by the unknown frontier. And the stake that Yuriga pounded into my heart is still there."

The two of them thought back to their meeting with Yuriga at the northern end of the continent.

Epilogue: Yuriga's Battle

A little before this war began, on the day Yuriga met Fuuga in front of the gates of the Seadian city of Haalga...

It was the first time the brother and sister had met in ages, but Yuriga had since become a part of the Kingdom of Friedonia through her marriage to Souma. They were certain to be on opposing sides in the war to come.

After Fuuga and Yuriga had chatted for a little while, he said, "And? What is it you want me to hear?"

"Something that I think you'd want to hear..." she said as she raised her hand.

The gates of Haalga opened, and a loud rumble filled the air as the sandy ground shook beneath their feet. Eventually, something massive was brought through the gates and carried out behind Yuriga. As Fuuga's and Mutsumi's eyes widened, Yuriga stared back at them, her gaze unwavering.

"I wanted to show you this. You ought to know about it because...it was in my reports," Yuriga said, gesturing to the object behind her. "And what I want to tell you is about the world where this thing was born."



What lay behind Yuriga was a massive skull. It had a draconic shape but was far bigger than that of the red dragon that Halbert rode or any of the dragons from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom that he had fought. Not even Fuuga had seen a creature so massive that its head alone was already larger than a rhinoceros.

Fuuga stared in awe at the majesty of the thing as Yuriga went on speaking.

“This is the skull of the kaiju Ooyamizuchi, which attacked the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago. As you can no doubt tell by its size, it was as large as a mountain or a small island, and the Kingdom of Friedonia and the former Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union were only able to slay it by combining their efforts and fighting together. The bones of Ooyamizuchi now belong to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom, but I made a request to Queen Shabon through Sir Souma. She allowed me to borrow the skull to present here today.”

“I’d heard about this...but it was truly a massive creature, wasn’t it?”
Mutsumi said, letting out a sigh.

“Yeah,” Fuuga answered with a nod. “If its head is already this big, then...it was way larger than even that mushroom-shaped weapon we fought. I can see how the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago couldn’t handle it alone.”

After saying this, Fuuga looked at Yuriga.

“So, why are you showing it to us?”

“I’m told that there are still more creatures of the same size across the sea, in the world of the north,” Yuriga said, gesturing towards the sea on the other side of Mao City.

She then explained everything that they currently knew about the world of the north to Fuuga. Beyond this sea was another world called Seadia that was the same size as the world of the south, Landia. Seadia was a world of scattered islands, and ever since the Seadians had lost it to the monsters that’d welled up, it had become a world of unknowns, the full picture of which wasn’t clear.

Fuuga quietly listened to Yuriga’s explanation.

The details sounded fanciful. But the fact that she was telling him while in front of the city of the Seadians, after rolling out a skull more massive than any he'd ever seen before...he was in the headspace to believe her. With Souma's permission, Yuriga revealed the information he planned to broadcast to the whole world later to Fuuga in advance.

Once she had divulged everything, she gulped before saying, "The Kingdom of Friedonia is already moving on into the new era."

"New era?" Fuuga asked.

"Yes." Yuriga nodded. "Whether you manage to win hegemony over this southern continent or not, the next era is guaranteed to be focused on people advancing into the world of the north. But that's obvious, isn't it? If we know there exists a world of mysteries to the north, then the adventurous and ambitious will bravely venture there. Conversely, having learned that the threat of monsters is still present, more conservative people will also feel a need to solve the issue. Because if they leave it alone, there could be more demon waves. That means that, no matter what, people will have to head north."

Yuriga looked Fuuga in the eye as she spoke this with certainty.

"Up until now, your dream of dominating the continent has been something that no one was capable of realizing before. If the south was all there was to this world, it would still be the greatest dream people could imagine. That ultimate dream was what charmed me and Big Sister Mutsumi. Everyone in the Great Tiger Empire has been working themselves to the bone in order to grant your big wish. Am I wrong about that?"

Though she asked him if he wanted to contradict her, there wasn't anything incorrect in what Yuriga was saying. And so, Fuuga and Mutsumi remained silent.

Taking their silence as assent, Yuriga continued.

"But the south isn't all there is to this world. Now it's clear there's a northern world as big as this one. Your dream may still be something no one has ever accomplished, but it's no longer the greatest dream imaginable. When Souma and Madam Mao met, the words 'world domination' changed in meaning to include the northern land too. And the Great Tiger Empire can't make that

dream a reality on its own.”

Yuriga spoke about the limits of Fuuga’s dream.

“When you are almost at the finish line... When people think that if you just defeat the Maritime Alliance, the dream will come true... Countless people had been willing to endure their grievances to keep running forward. But now that there’s another frontier, will they have to run the same distance all over again? They’ve already been pushed to their limits, and now they’ll be told that they’re only at the halfway point. There’s no way they could tolerate that. There’s guaranteed to be a break in popular support. And the Great Tiger Kingdom, which has been pushing itself ragged all this time, doesn’t have the stamina left to stop them.”

Fuuga and Mutsumi watched Yuriga, focusing on her words.

“The only ones adapted to this coming era are the Maritime Alliance, who’ve conserved their stamina by building a loose union of nations and raised the power of each of them through technological cooperation! There’s no choice but to head out into the world of the north, and the Maritime Alliance can do that. They’ll maintain their loose union while each country cooperates with Madam Mao and the Seadians to send people there. With Madam Mao helping them, they can utilize the gate to another world. Sir Souma and his people have already started experimenting with sending expeditions to the north to investigate.”

“Huh?! Souma’s already laying his hands on the world of the north?!” Fuuga cried out in surprise, earning him a firm nod from Yuriga.

“Of course. But because that risks being seen as attempting to monopolize it for just his country, he has also reached out to the other nations of the Maritime Alliance, the Seadians, and the Dragon Knight Kingdom to send out an advance survey team that will operate under the joint management of all the countries involved.”

Yuriga’s eyes narrowed on Fuuga.

“Did you just think he stole a march on you, Brother?”

“...!”

“I said earlier that the adventurous and the ambitious would want to go north, and doesn’t that describe you perfectly, Brother? When you heard my explanation, you got excited, didn’t you? Didn’t you want to go north yourself?”

“Well...”

Fuuga was at a loss for words. Hearing Yuriga’s explanation and seeing the massive skull before him made his heart race... The excitement welling up inside him told him she was right.

Yuriga carried on as if she saw right through him.

“I’m talking to you like this because I understand just what kind of person you are, Brother. And I think that those who’ve gathered under you and are able to share your dream are the same. Shuukin, Gaten, Moumei, and Kasen. They’d all be just as excited to hear what I just told you. Don’t you feel the same way, Big Sister Mutsumi?”

“Ah...! I suppose you’re right,” Mutsumi replied with a resigned nod as the conversation suddenly turned to her. “I don’t know what my brother and his people will think about it, but I couldn’t help but think how interesting it would be to race across the world of the north at my husband’s side.”

Fuuga awkwardly scratched his head. “Okay, I agree there’s a certain allure to what Yuriga’s saying. But why tell us about it now? There’s no way I can simply call off the war with the Kingdom so we can all go up north together, you know?”

“If you could...wouldn’t that be nice?” Yuriga said with a sad look. “For me, a world where you adjusted course to cooperate with the Maritime Alliance, maintaining the empire while cooperating with Sir Souma to head into the world of the north...would be my ideal. But you’ve all shed too much and are carrying too heavy a burden on your shoulders to be able to do that.”

“Yeah... There’s no stopping me now,” Fuuga said with a quiet nod. “All the countries I’ve annexed and the guys I’ve cut down would never let me get away with that. Abandoning my dream halfway would mean throwing away all of the sacrifices that have been made for it. No matter what the ultimate result is, the dream needs to be seen through to its conclusion. For that, I need to settle things with Souma.”

Fuuga's words were a rejection.

"I know that," Yuriga said, raising her head.

Although her expression was firm, there were big tears pooling in the corners of her eyes.

"As a great man, you don't have the right to stop... Still, I wanted to gamble on the faint hope there was. Because I don't want to see your dream come to a sad end."

"Yuriga..."

"But I wanted you to know that if you ever fall from power and are no longer a great man, then this option is available to you. *When* you lose the next war, now that you've heard what I wanted to say, I'm sure you won't be able to keep on fighting to take revenge on the Maritime Alliance. Because rather than keep fighting long, drawn-out battles against Souma and the others, the desire to go to the world of the north is sure to keep on tormenting you..." Yuriga explained through her tears.

Fuuga's eyes went wide. "Was that what you were after?"

He finally figured out what Yuriga's goal was—this was why she'd called him out here, to the northernmost reaches of the continent, to talk with him at this point in time.

"You wanted to put a time limit on my dream, huh?"

If there was no way to avoid a battle between Souma and Fuuga, then at the very least, she wanted it to end with one conflict. Should Fuuga win, his dream would be complete. But assuming he lost, the Maritime Alliance had no intention of invading the Great Tiger Empire, so he could come back and try again several times. However, now that Fuuga had heard Yuriga's story, he would prefer going north over a prolonged series of wars with the Maritime Alliance.

The coming of a new era. A new dream.

Now that he was aware, Fuuga could no longer be a great man.

Fuuga let out a sigh as if something that had possessed him was escaping

from his body. “I see... You’ve served me some real ‘poison.’ The fast-acting type known as information...”

“I’m sorry, Brother,” Yuriga apologized. Fuuga placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t be. You were trying to bring about the conclusion you want to see, right? Then hold your head high.”

“Brother...”

“Yuriga. Who are you right now? The little sister of the Great Tiger Emperor, Fuuga Haan?”

“No...”

Wiping her tears, Yuriga looked straight at Fuuga.

“I am Yuriga, King Souma E. Friedonia’s queen!”

“That’s fine. You follow the path that you believe in!”

“Yes!”

With that, Fuuga and Yuriga’s conversation in the north came to an end.



As the promotional video Souma had prepared played, Fuuga and Mutsumi thought back to that day.

“It’s just a matter of whether we win or lose. If we win, my dream will be accomplished. If we lose, the people’s hearts will be split between carrying on with the struggle or reconciling in order to advance into the north. Once we’re in that situation, we’ll never be able to take on the Maritime Alliance again.”

“Yes, I agree. And I expect, if that happens, your passion for dominating the continent will begin to cool off.”

Fuuga smiled wryly and nodded at what Mutsumi was saying.

“Yeah. Seriously... You’re one hell of a little sister, Yuriga!”

Fuuga gave his little sister, Yuriga, who was probably in the enemy camp right now, a compliment that she couldn’t possibly hear.

Afterword

Thank you for buying volume 18 of *How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom*. I am Dojyomaru, who has been making good progress writing romantic comedies on the side because this story is so serious a lot of the time.

This volume is the first half of the final battle with Fuuga.

Fuuga rushes forward, pushing on by the times he lives in, while Souma tries to change the era itself. The conclusion to this battle, which every country has been caught up in, is close at hand.

I'm the type who gets invested in the characters he creates, so the ensemble cast has grown more and more. Even in an isekai story, in which people prefer the protagonist to be the only strong one, or in a romantic comedy like *Yashiro-kun*, my cast keeps on growing, and the length of the text with them.

By contrast, for *Nomad Princess*, I've been focused on avoiding that by making it a one-on-one romantic comedy. Although, I suspect the cast will grow there too, but it should be fine...I think.

Now, with this series having grown to eighteen volumes before I knew it, the story is nearing its conclusion. I expect volume 20 will be the final volume of *Realist Hero*.

I'd like to thank everyone who was involved with this book, and all of my readers.

Bonus Short Stories

The Nine-Headed Dragon Queen Is Very Busy

As total war between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire drew close, people across the world grew tense and fearful of the coming conflict. But amidst this turmoil, the people of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom were relaxed.

Their country was separated from the continent by the sea, so the Great Tiger Empire was unlikely to invade them anytime soon. And even if they were attacked, the Empire's unfamiliarity with the ocean would deter their ability to pull off a landing. That was the general assumption, at least. But while the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom was adept at sea battles, they had virtually no experience fighting far inland. They also lacked any commanders who could lead such a campaign, so Fuuga didn't view them as a threat and was content to ignore them until the war with the Kingdom of Friedonia was over.

While the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom was distant from the final battle shaping up on the continent, their queen, Shabon, was still incredibly busy. Even now, she was fighting with the mound of paperwork before her...

This country's culture was a mix of Tang China and Edo Japan, so the documents were left on the thick tatami mats, forming a circle around a low writing desk. She also wrote with a writing brush, so looking into this room, one may have thought she was a writer.

"I have a report," Kishun announced from beside Shabon.

He was her husband but generally acted as her subordinate at work.

"Sir Kuu, head of the Republic, has ordered additional lion-dog guns..."

"He cannot have them," Shabon firmly rejected without raising her head.

"Our production is already near its limit, correct?"

"It is as you say." Kishun nodded profusely. "It would be impossible to raise

the pace any further.”

Currently, the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago was awash with firearm orders from the other countries of the Maritime Alliance.

One of the items was the lion-dog gun cannon—a miniature, portable cannon (like a hand cannon or a crouching tiger cannon). It had been a minor weapon used in naval battles in which magic use was limited. However, the development of the magic canceler by the Kingdom of Friedonia changed the status quo. The magic canceler created zones on land in which magic couldn’t be used; thus, gunpowder weapons suddenly took the spotlight. With an inevitable battle between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire, their allies had ordered even more lion-dog guns to bolster their war potential.

“We are turning a profit, but it is hard to be completely pleased with the situation...” Shabon sighed. She laid down her brush and rested her cheek on the palm of her hand. “While it is good that the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Republic of Turgis have provided us with iron, which we tend to run short of, we cannot do anything about the number of craftsmen. It is not simple to train more, so we cannot lower quality to increase their output either.”

Kishun nodded in agreement. “Yes, you’re right. Especially when people’s lives and the war’s outcome could be affected.”

“Very well. We have already sent the amount ordered in advance, so we must ask the other alliance members to compromise with each other.”

“Understood.” Kishun bowed, then switched gears and continued reading the report. “Next, we have a letter from Queen Yuriga of the Kingdom of Friedonia. There is something she wishes to borrow from our country.”

“Yuriga? What does she want?”

“Well...”

Kishun named what Yuriga had requested, and Shabon gave him a blank stare.

“She wants *that*? At a time like this? Why?”

“She only writes that it is for a strategy of hers. However, the letter also bears King Souma’s signature, so in all likelihood...”

“The Kingdom of Friedonia has something in mind for it, then.”

“Indeed.”

Shabon thought about it briefly, then nodded. “Very well. Kishun, where is it being kept?”

“We are touring the island with it as an emblem of your rule and a symbol of stability.”

“Please have it recalled and sent to the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

“Understood.”

“Now then...”

Having listened to all the reports and handled all of the paperwork for now, Shabon was about to move on to the next thing...

“M-Mother...” came a hesitant voice from the doorway.

Shabon and Kishun turned to see their daughter, Princess Sharan, poking her head out from behind the sliding door panel.

“Sharan? What is it?”

Sharan was as introverted as Shabon had once been. It was unusual for her to come to the office during work hours, so they were surprised to see her.

“Um, I wanted to ask you, Mother.”

Sharan’s eyes wandered as she spoke. Shabon turned to face her daughter.

“What is it?” she asked with a smile.

Seeming to find her resolve, Sharan said, “Um...I heard Fweedonia is in danger.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Will Lord Cian and Lady Kazuha be okay...?”

Sharan was too young to understand war, but even she sensed that it threatened Cian and Kazuha and that they might not meet again.

“You love both of them, don’t you, Sharan?”

“Yes.”

Shabon remained kneeling as she approached Sharan.

“It’ll be okay,” Shabon said as she hugged her. “You’ll see them again soon. I’ll make sure it happens.”

“Really...?”

“Yes. Just leave it to your mother.”

With that, Shabon lifted Sharan up into her arms and turned to address Kishun.

“Move the plan into its next phase. For the sake of Sharan and her husband-to-be.”

It was thought that Queen Shabon would have no influence on the war’s outcome, but it would not be long before she sent something that would push Fuuga into a corner.

A Dangerous Combination

As total war between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire drew close...

“Achoo! Urgh... It’s so cold.”

“Ookyakya! Glad you could make it, Miss Trill! And welcome.”

They were near the northern edge of the Republic of Turgis, in a city now named Tarus, which they’d gained in the last war. Here, Kuu, Taru, Leporina, and Nike from the Republic were meeting Princess Trill of the Euphoria Kingdom.

Trill rubbed her arms for warmth as she looked around. “The Republic is every bit as frigid as I’ve heard...”

“Oh, yeah? I feel like it’s pretty warm around these parts,” Kuu replied cheerily.

Sighing, Nike said, “I keep telling you, it feels totally different to us *humans*. Even during the summer, in a place like Sapeur, I feel I still need two more

layers over my shirt.”

Nike and Trill were the only humans present. Since Nike wasn't a member of the Five Races of the Snowy Plains, who'd adapted to life in cold climates, he felt the chill of the Republic all the way to his bones.

Kuu carried on, not letting Nike's comment distract him. “Sorry to spring this on you when you've just arrived, Miss Trill, but I'd like your assistance in building defenses for Tarus and the neighboring city of Leporus. They will be the first battlefields when we go up against the Great Tiger Empire. We need to harden the defenses so they're not easily breached.”

This was Kuu's plan, for which he'd called in Trill, who was a foreign princess. During the earlier top-level meeting between the four countries of the Maritime Alliance, Kuu heard that Jeanne didn't know what to do with the eccentric Drill Princess, so he made a point of inviting her to the Republic. Trill had been quick to accept his proposal.

“Big Sister Jeanne has already told me about it. But are you sure?” Trill said, tilting her head to the side. “I'm an amateur when it comes to war, so perhaps you'd be better to ask someone else?”

“Oh, I don't mind that.” Kuu grinned. “I'll come up with the ideas for defensive equipment, so you just decide if they're possible. If you think you can pull them off, then Taru and her engineers will make them with you. All expenses paid by the Republic, of course.”

“In that case...I guess it's fine.”

“Great. So, I'd heard about Bro having Mechadra remodeled by Genia and her team, and that pile driver was your idea? That's when I thought I just had to bring you here to remodel the fortress walls.”

“Oh, that was a really hard job...” Taru sighed, recalling her involvement.

She'd worked on the remodel of Mechadra, albeit only as a craftsperson, with the ideas coming chiefly from Genia and Trill. She had suffered alongside Merula, the other common-sense person on the team, as they tried to turn all those ridiculous thoughts into a reality.

“Now, now,” Leporina said, trying to soothe Taru, who had a far-off look in

her eyes.

Kuu clapped his hands.

“Anyway, we shouldn’t just stand around. Let’s take this somewhere we can discuss it at length.”

The group relocated to the mansion Nike had been given as the temporary magistrate of Tarus. The large desk in his office was covered in all sorts of documents scattered about at random.

“What is this...?!” Trill exclaimed, her eyes widening as she picked one up.

Each page carried some contraption Kuu wanted to be made, along with a simple illustration. But what surprised Trill wasn’t the contents but the volume.

“You have this many ideas?”

“Sure. I just wrote down things I wanted to try, and this is how it turned out.”

Kuu didn’t even feel bad about it. Trill looked at one of his ideas. It said, “Dragon on wall that looks decorative suddenly spews fire at enemies.” The other ideas were similar in nature.

“These are all very...offbeat, let’s say.” Trill was, uncharacteristically, a little weirded out. “You seem eager for this war, Kuu. Yet Big Sister Jeanne and Big Brother Hakuya looked so somber about it.”

“Huh? Nah. I think the war’s a pain. I just had kids, and I don’t want to waste my time on this stuff... Y’know?”

“Really? You seem to have a lot of ideas, considering,” Taru said, nonplussed by this surprising opinion from Kuu.

“Ookyakya! Because I don’t want to fight a *boring* war. This battle’s going to be a localized conflict anyway. The real result will be decided by the showdown between Bro and Fuuga. I just want to kick up all the dust I can and keep our losses to a minimum while we drive the enemy off. That’s all.”

The look on Kuu’s face as he spoke was unquestionably that of a ruler’s.

“Lord Kuu always catches us off guard when it comes to these things,” said Leporina, to which Taru and Nike both nodded.

Hearing that, Trill was taken aback for a moment but soon put on a bold smile. “Then I won’t hold back either. I’ll take on the task with everything I have.”

And so, the dangerous combination of Kuu and Trill joined forces and prepared to meet the Great Tiger Empire in battle.

Learning a Secret Technique

As total war between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire drew close, a wyvern flew above Parnam Castle.

On the back of the wyvern, as it traced complicated arcs through the sky, was not a soldier but a maid—Carla, daughter of the former General of the Air Force. Her frilly maid dress flapped in the wind as the wyvern flew.

“Okay... Here we go!” Carla shouted to her wyvern and held the reins tight.

It got into a position with its head skyward and tail groundward...then suddenly it spun its neck and tail and flapped its wings, allowing it to decelerate in midair. Having lost lift in its wings, the wyvern gradually dropped altitude.

Urgh... Is it no good?

Carla pulled back on the reins again. That got the wyvern to readjust its position, spread its wings wide, and gently float to the ground.

“Hrmm... It’s just not working...” Carla murmured as the wyvern touched down.

There was the sound of footsteps running towards her.

“That looked like hard work, Carla,” called out a voice.

“Why, it’s Lady Tomoe!”

“Ah! You don’t need to dismount. You’re busy training, right?”

It was Liscia’s adopted sister, Tomoe. After stopping Carla from getting off the wyvern, Tomoe looked up at the beast with curious eyes.

“This sure is unusual. I don’t see you flying a wyvern often.”

“Well, lately I’ve been busy with my work as a maid, so I haven’t had the chance...”

“Then why today?”

“Oh, well... In the war against the Great Tiger Empire, my father—Castor—and I will most likely be needed on the battlefield, and he told me there was a technique he wanted me to practice for that.”

“A technique...?”

“Yes, but more importantly, what brings you here, Lady Tomoe?”

Tomoe grinned and petted the wyvern. “I’m doing wyvern health checkups because I can ask them questions.”

“That makes sense.”

Tomoe’s ability let her understand what animals (and Seadians) were saying, so wyverns could tell her about their symptoms directly. With the decisive battle against the Great Tiger Empire drawing near, they hoped to have the wyverns as close to top shape as possible.

Tomoe cocked her head to the side. “So, Carla, what is this technique you mentioned?”

“Oh, no, I really shouldn’t say...”

“Ah! If it’s a military secret, you don’t have to.”

“No, it should be safe to tell you, Lady Tomoe. The truth is...”

Carla then explained everything she could about the technique that Castor was trying to get her to learn, breaking it down so it was easier to understand. Tomoe nodded along as she listened.

When the explanation was done, Carla let out a sigh. “It’s a technique I’ve never done before, so I don’t know how I’m supposed to move or how to effectively convey that to the wyvern. It’s incredibly frustrating.”

“I see... Let me talk to this wyvern for a moment.”

Tomoe then chatted with the wyvern.

“...and that’s what she wants. Can you do it?”

The wyvern let out a low roar, then growled.

“Oh, I see. Well, try to remember what happened that time.”

The wyvern roared again.

To Carla’s ears, it sounded as though Tomoe was speaking while the wyvern was roaring, yet they were communicating.

Tomoe was engrossed in the conversation for a while, but eventually turned to look at Carla.

“I explained, and it says it ‘should be able to do it.’”

“O-Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll give it a try, then.”

Carla flew up into the sky with her wyvern again. It flew around, and she pulled back on the reins once they’d built momentum.

“Huh?!”

It worked this time! Lady Tomoe is amazing!

After brilliantly executing the maneuver, she flew down to land beside Tomoe, bursting with glee.

Smoothly dismounting from her wyvern, Carla said, “We did it, Lady Tomoe!”

“Eek?!”

To reiterate, Carla was wearing a maid dress—a short one—designed by Serina. When she jumped down from the wyvern’s back, she...fully exposed her undergarments.

Tomoe covered her face with her hands, and Carla turned a bright shade of red as she realized what had happened. Her one salvation was that the sole witness was Tomoe.

“Um... If you’re going to continue training, maybe you should put some pants on underneath?”

“Uh, yeah. I’ll go borrow some from Liscia.”

Even though she had learned the technique, Carla also felt very silly.

Relying on the God of War When Times Are Tough

The decisive battle with the Great Tiger Empire led by Fuuga Haan was fast approaching, and we have been steadily preparing to meet him in battle. We didn't just need careful planning and the deployment of forces; we also needed to evacuate residents along the predicted invasion path. In order to convince them to leave quietly, we had to show them that the evacuation destinations would have the supplies they'd need to survive, which we had to prepare too... Essentially, we had a load of things to do.

I'd left the military plans to Hakuya, Julius, Excel, and Kaede so I could focus entirely on the paperwork. But even as I did, I couldn't escape the plaguing uncertainty of the war. Our opponent was the favorite child of this era, the great Fuuga. No amount of preparation could have given me complete confidence.

I have nowhere near the guts that Fuuga has...

I couldn't approach things with the kind of cavalier attitude towards my own death that he had. I didn't want to die, and I didn't want to lose any of my family. I'd like to think everyone in this country felt the same way. And yet, with just a simple order from me, many lives could be lost. If I ever stopped feeling pressured by that fact, it would mean I was no longer human.

Being human means wanting something to cling to... I thought with a sigh.

"What are you sighing about, Souma?" asked Julius, who was waiting on the paperwork I was handling. "The whole castle is on edge right now. If you act that way, you'll make those beneath you uneasy."

"Sorry... I just can't help but be concerned. Here's the paperwork."

"Duly received... Well, it's not that I don't understand where you're coming from," Julius said, a slight furrow in his brow despite his calm face. "One of the Great Tiger Empire's strengths is their lack of fear of loss. They are a group which had little to begin with, so it stands to reason they would act this way. On the other hand, we have our loved ones to care for, which comes with the fear of losing them."

"Yeah... And that is all the more reason everyone can dig their heels in,

determined to defend those loved ones. But there's no getting rid of the uncertainty and doubt. Although, maybe that's a worry the Great Tiger Empire would be glad to have."

I leaned back in my chair and stared up at the ceiling.

"When I've got my back to the wall like this, I find myself wanting to cling to just about anything. I'm about ready to start praying to the god of war for help."

I wouldn't turn to the gods when times were tough...but it wasn't because I was an atheist. Being Japanese, even if we didn't have a concrete faith in Shinto, Buddhism, or Christianity, we did have an ingrained reverence for our ancestors and the natural world. We'd think things like, "How will I ever face my ancestors?" or pray to a rock that would never fall and ask it for success on our exams. That was why I felt an urge to rely on them now...which may be the mental space that people in cults took advantage of.

As I contemplated that, I noticed Julius was also deep in thought.

"Hmm..." he grunted.

"Is something up?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. I was thinking that, if you're uneasy, you might try asking the gods a favor for real."

Me? Turn to the gods for help? In this world? I thought, then said, "But I'm not a Mother Dragon or Lunaria worshipper."

"No, I don't mean it like that. You could pray to a war god who's close to you."

"A war god who's close to me?" I wondered, repeating the strange phrase.

Julius smiled and nodded. "Yes, a god that is close and deeply involved with us."



Near Van, the capital of the former Principality of Amidonia, a mausoleum had been erected atop a hill that looked down on the river where we had floated boats for the Memorial Festival.

“Is this Grandpa’s house?”

“Sure is. This is where your grandfather lies sleepin’,” Roroa explained to our son, Leon, who was holding her hand.

“Are Leon’s grandpa and my grandpa the same?”

“Hee hee! Yes, that’s right. He’s your grandfather too,” Julius’s wife, Tia, said while holding their son, Tius, in her arms.

This was the mausoleum of Gaius VIII, father of Roroa and Julius.

We’d held the Memorial Festival for him to console the people of the Amidonia Region, who had admired his feats as a warrior. If a festival was to be held, there needed to be a place for celebration and worship, so we built this mausoleum on the site of the princely family’s grave.

I didn’t know this part myself, but at some point, Gaius—who was worshipped in this mausoleum—had been elevated to war god status. I had only set the place up to console the spirits of the dead, but as it was a place of worship, people assumed it was for some god, so warriors started worshipping Gaius there because of how he had acted during his life.

I was here to pray with Roroa and Leon, plus Julius, Tia, and Tius—all members of Gaius’s family.

“Never thought I’d be praying to my father-in-law for help,” I muttered before the mausoleum.

Julius stifled a laugh. “Ah, well, he’s still a father to Roroa and me.”

“Now that you say that...it really feels like we’re just visiting the family grave.”

I felt like I was standing in front of a relative’s Buddhist altar during Obon. To think Gaius would be revered as a warrior god...

“He might help you, Julius, but would he really lend me his strength?” I asked.

“Even if they hate their son-in-law, grandfathers are always soft on the grandchildren.”

Julius gestured to Roroa and the others with his chin.

“Go on, put your hands together ‘n’ pray to Grandpa,” said Roroa.

“You too, Tius,” followed up Tia. “Let him know that we’re all doing well.”

““Okayyy.””

Leon and Tius, now four years old, did as their mothers told them and held up their hands. They were striking poses, but they looked cute, so it was fine.

Even Gaius’s stony face would have softened to see such adorable grandkids.

“Yeah... I’ll pray too.”

I bowed twice, then clapped my hands twice, even though that wasn’t the general custom in this world.

I promise to protect your children, grandchildren, and the land you loved. Even if you can’t stand me, please be on my side for now. I ask that you give me the courage...so that I can stand without fear, even if Fuuga appears before me.

With that prayer, I bowed my head deeply towards the mausoleum.

Their Bygone Days

In the Gran Chaos Empire, before Souma had been summoned to this world...

As Lumiere ate by herself in the cafeteria of the officers’ academy, where future commanders of the Empire were trained, Jeanne, the younger sister of Empress Maria, walked over carrying a tray of food.

“Hey, Lumi. Mind if I sit with you?”

“You don’t need to ask. If there’s an open seat, you can just take it, you know?”

Lumiere’s words were blunt but not out of malice; she was simply that way by nature. Jeanne knew this, so she smiled and took a seat.

Jeanne and Lumiere. The royal and the future retainer. They came from different backgrounds but were serious and hard workers. They got along well and were quite close friends.

“Come to think of it, Lumi, I hear you turned down a senior who asked you out again,” Jeanne said between bites of food.

Lumiere's brow furrowed. "Don't say 'again.' You make me sound bad."

"How many is that this month?"

"He'd be the third...I think?"

"If he was the third one in just two weeks, then you've been getting asked out more than once a week."

"It's a real headache."

"There must be no shortage of guys interested in a beautiful and talented woman like you."

"Do I detect a hint of spite?" Lumiere gave Jeanne a slight glare as she skewered some fried fish with her fork. "Because when a talented beauty like *you* says it, it sure sounds like it's out of spite."

"Hmm? But no one has ever asked me out."

"Of course not! No matter how pretty you are, nobody's going to try putting the moves on the empress's little sister. Everyone would assume his parents had ambitions, and the guy would be disowned to distance themselves from it. No idiot would choose you with that kind of risk involved."

"W-Well...I'm sure you're probably right."

"They go after me because, next to you, I seem more attainable. Not that I have any interest in a proposition like that, which lacks even a shred of ambition."

Lumiere tore into the piece of fried fish impaled on the end of her fork with a vengeance. Jeanne smiled wryly, noting she must be in quite a foul mood.

"Besides, I can just tell they're only settling for me because they can't seduce you," Lumiere angrily grumbled. "No, wait, it's worse than that! They want to get close to me as a way of getting closer to you. What does that make me? A stalking horse?! Or maybe a breakwater for you?"

"S-Sorry about that. But...no, I understand how you feel."

"Huh? Why would *you* understand?"

"Because I'm often treated as 'Lady Maria's little sister' or 'the Euphoria sister

who isn't Maria,'" Jeanne answered, sighing.

Lumiere stopped eating when she heard that. As Jeanne was the younger sister of the charismatic Maria, it wasn't hard to see why Jeanne was treated as the lesser of the two. Only Jeanne would know how Jeanne felt about that.

"Wait, but you have another sister, don't you?"

Jeanne gave Lumiere a blank. "Huh? You mean Trill? She's a problem child in her own right. Sure, she's talented at making things, but she's also at the center of all sorts of trouble. Sometimes I even get called 'the younger Euphoria sister who isn't a problem child.'"

"It's tough being the middle child, huh?"

Lumiere sympathized with Jeanne, and her anger faded away. A wave of exhaustion then washed over her, and she sighed.

"Honestly...I can't stand the affection of older men. They're so transparent in their desire to use me for their family's benefit or their own future."

"Hmm. You're into younger men, Lumi?"

"Uh, I'm not sure I'd put it that way... How about you, Jeanne? I know you're not allowed to have a love life, but do any of our classmates interest you?"

"Hrmm... When it comes to boys my age or younger, they all tend to look at my sister, not me."

"Well...you can't really compete with that motherly aura."

Maria's goddess-like smile could purify any sex-obsessed man's heart and turn him back into a little boy...or so they say. There was something positively inviolable and sacred about her.

"Their reverence may be a burden on Sister though." Jeanne gave a small smile. "That's why I think someone mature, who'll only look at me, might be ideal."

"Hmm... So you're into *older* guys, Jeanne."

"H-Hey! Was that payback for earlier?"

"Well, it'd be nice if our ideal partners could meet."

It was ironic that these two, having such an uneventful conversation, would one day end up as enemies in opposing camps. But whether they had men they could consider their ideal partners nearby... Well, that could be a bit of a funny story.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[World Map](#)

[Prologue: Old Man, the Ultimate Weapon](#)

[Chapter 1: Petty Trickery Runs in the Family](#)

[Chapter 2: New Year's in Both Camps](#)

[Chapter 3: The Paths of Brother and Sister](#)

[Chapter 4: Towards World War](#)

[Chapter 5: Intense in the South, Quiet in the West](#)

[Chapter 6: For Whom Do You Fight?](#)

[Chapter 7: Even If We Part](#)

[Chapter 8: Illusions on the Kingdom Front](#)

[Chapter 9: A Heated Battle! The Red Dragon City Front](#)

[Chapter 10: Shared Pain](#)

[Chapter 11: The Moment the Era Changed](#)

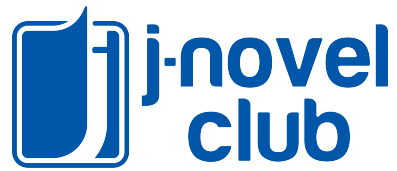
[Epilogue: Yuriga's Battle](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 18

by Dojyomaru

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